



A PLACE OF VULNERABILITY

Over Lent we've been looking at Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. And we've been thinking about subjects such as hardship, temptation, surrender, life-lessons, doubt, and the positive things that can come out of our own desert experiences. Or as a certain *OneRepublic* song puts it, "Everything that kills me makes me feel alive" (i.e. risk is a necessary part of a life fully lived).

Today we're going to end the series by thinking about the wilderness as a place of vulnerability. Let's turn to ...

Mark 1:12-13

In this tiny passage from Mark (blink and you'll miss it) are 3 encounters that sum up the whole point of Jesus' time in the desert: 1) He met with temptation (from Satan); 2) He met with trouble (from wild animals); and 3) He met with help (from angels). According to Jewish tradition, these encounters were also true of Adam. And if we see Adam as a picture of us, then Jesus truly became like ... us.

So, what do these 3 encounters have to teach us? About Jesus, ourselves, and the power of vulnerability?

1) He Met With Temptation. Mark's account kicks off with these words: "Being tempted by Satan ..."

How was Jesus tempted? Mark doesn't give us the exact details, but Matthew and Luke do. Satan used the things that humans crave most – pleasure,

popularity, power – to try to deflect Jesus from the mission He was born for. That doesn't mean Satan understood what it was Jesus was going to do, but he knew he didn't want Jesus doing it. So, he tried to lure Jesus away.

Now while it's true that Jesus was tempted in ways *we* cannot imagine, that doesn't mean we can be tempted in ways *Jesus* cannot imagine. Jesus was tempted just as we are, yet resisted it – because He realised that temptation is more than some mere biological impulse.

It's a battle between good and evil, to be fought. And won.

All of which might encourage us ... or leave us feeling inadequate. I mean, Jesus might be *like* us, but He's also got an advantage. Because He's the Son of God, right?

This is true. But as we'll see, as Christians *we* have an advantage, too.

We just don't realise it a lot of the time.

2) He Met With Trouble. Mark says: "He was with the wild animals ..."

Let's do a bit of a guided reflection. Close your eyes. I want you to picture Jesus, standing by a gently flowing stream. And what is He holding in His arms? It's a fluffy white lamb. And then picture a little duckling waddling up to take a look, followed by a couple of cuddly rabbits, and a sparrow or two sitting on each shoulder. Plus, whatever other relatively harmless animals you care to mention ...

We've all seen those kinds of pictures, haven't we?

But that's not the picture Mark is painting for us here.

So, let's scrap that picture. Imagine Jesus again - only this time, He's in the desert. And He's crouching down and looking at something. What is it? It's a scorpion. Not too fond of scorpions? OK, imagine Him facing down a leopard instead; or scaring off the vultures to let them know He's not ready to die yet; or playing fetch with the jackals; or talking away to a viper curled up on a rock ...

Weird? Maybe. But that is the kind of picture we find in Mark's Gospel. What is God saying to us here?

This is not some nice, safe, stained-glass picture. This is a dangerous picture – because the desert is a dangerous place. And life can be, too. We might like to think we're in charge, but the desert is a reminder that we are not.

And that's not a bad thing. If it drives us to God.

3) He Met With Help. At the end of vs13 Mark says, "And the angels of God attended Him" or 'were *serving* Him.'

In Greek, the verb *diekonoun* is an imperfect indicative active verb. What does that mean? It means the angels were *always* serving. Yes, they brought Him food at the end of His time in the wilderness, but they were there the rest of the time, too – encouraging Him, supporting Him, rooting for Him, whispering "Keep going Lord – You can do this!"

Angels can come to us in various forms (bearing in mind that the Hebrew *malach* and Greek *angelos* both mean 'messenger'): it might be the straight-out-of-the-presence-of-God kind, or it might be people who are there to carry the burdens and share the tears with us, or it might be verses of Scripture, or the words of a song or poem, or a painting or a scene from a movie that resonates with our hearts and helps us get through the hard times.

How ever you view it, it's really God at work here. Because wherever angels are, God is. And in every wilderness, help is on offer. If you know where to look for it.

Open Up

What does this say about Jesus? It says that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords made Himself vulnerable, for us.

What does it say about *us*? That when we meet with temptation and trouble, we can also meet with help. But this raises one, last, question: how did the disciples learn about Jesus' desert experience? Jesus must have told them. Why? To help them understand there is strength to be found in vulnerability. In an age of toxic masculinity / femininity, we don't like to admit we're vulnerable – we'd rather pretend we're independent, self-sufficient, in control. But we're not. And it is only when we admit that we're unable to do this on our own, that God steps in.

To close, here's a Puritan prayer that I think sums up the whole of this series:

*Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
You have brought me to the valley of vision,
Where I live in the depths but see You in the heights;
Hemmed in by mountains of sin, I behold Your glory.
Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up,
That to be low is to be high,
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
That the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
That to have nothing is to possess all,
That to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
That to give is to receive,
That the valley is the place of vision.
In the daytime, stars can be seen from deepest wells,
And the deeper the wells, the brighter Your stars.
Let me find Your light in my darkness,
Your life in my death, Your joy in my sorrow,
Your grace in my sin, Your riches in my poverty,
Your glory in my valley.*