

## Mark 1:9-15 Embracing the wilderness.

A couple of years ago, I came across this brilliant picture of All Saints, taken at night. (screen) In the deep blackness of the night, despite illumination of the church with a flash, the camera has caught the myriad of twinkling stars in the Milky Way. It's a stunning photo. But if you've ever been out in the country and looked up into the night sky, you'll know that this photo doesn't even begin to do justice to the sight! As our eyes became accustomed to the dark, we find the longer we look, the more stars we see. A starry sky in the in the bush is breathtaking!

Why does the night sky look so different in the country? It is because of the absolute the darkness. In suburbia, when we look up into the sky, we miss seeing the extent of the stars because of the light emanating from the hundreds or even thousands of households, shops and street lights.

In the country, or in the desert, in absolute darkness, we begin to see the myriad of tiny pinpricks of light that when we are in a town, we miss altogether.

Sometimes, it takes sitting in the darkness, to see things that we miss in the light. This is true also in the spiritual realm.

How do we handle spiritual darkness?

We can all encounter times when we lose confidence in God. The trials and tribulations of this life can cause us to question his love and care for us. We can lose confidence in prayer. We may begin question those things we were once so sure of about God. Perhaps we even begin to question if any of this God stuff matters at all.

These times are nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, they often necessary - because it is through them that we learn things about God and about ourselves, that we may not learn any other way.

ter this sort of wilderness, it can be a very lonely place. We can't talk to God - he seems too far away. And it's hard to share how we're feeling with anyone else. If we do, we're likely to get advice that, thought well meaning, just doesn't work. You know what I mean, don't you? "You just have to praise God more;" or "You need to pray more;" or "There must be something you need to repent of if you feel distant from God." No doubt all good advice in itself, but not very helpful if we are wandering alone, in a spiritual wilderness.

Today's Gospel reading is the account of Jesus' journey into the wilderness as he prepares to embark on his ministry. It is a significant story - not just for what it teaches us about Jesus, but for what it reveals to us about our own journey with God.

There are similarities between Jesus' journey into the wilderness and our own wilderness times:

For instance:

- We note that Jesus had just had an amazing encounter with God. He'd had a spectacular touch from the Holy Spirit, and affirmation of his call. What a wonderful experience! But then he soon found himself in the wilderness. This is not uncommon. We can experience times of great closeness to God, only to find them followed by periods of great barrenness! Mountains and valleys. It is the stuff of everyday life.
- We also note that this time in the wilderness was not of Jesus' choosing. We read in Mark that the Spirit 'sent' Jesus into the desert. Other translations render the Greek word here as 'drove.' The Spirit 'drove' Jesus into the desert. It wasn't just a little idea Jesus had at that time - he wasn't thinking, "What a gorgeous day. I think I'll go for a little walk." No. He didn't choose this for himself.

In the same way, often those times when we start to feel ourselves drifting away from God are not of our own choosing. They may come about as a result of bereavement, or a broken relationship, or a prolonged illness or a trauma of some kind. They are outside our control and are often thrust upon us. We feel spiritually fragile and plunge into a time of darkness that we seem unable to do anything about it.

Occasionally we might drift away from God as a consequence of sin - then our sense of separation from God is a result of our choices. That is more easily remedied than what many have called the "dark night of the soul" - those times when we feel God has abandoned us.

- In his journey into the wilderness, we see that Jesus was alone. There was no one to accompany him. That is perhaps the single most painful thing about finding ourselves in a spiritual wilderness - we feel so very alone.

Let's have a look at Jesus' wilderness experience.

This wilderness time for Jesus would have been very unsettling. If we read Luke's account of the same story, we learn that there in the desert, Jesus' very identity was challenged. **"IF you are the Son of God" said Satan, "command these stones to become bread and satisfy your hunger. IF you are the son of God, throw yourself down from the temple and let God prove himself."**

The devil's temptations were also aimed at eroding Jesus' confidence in his heavenly Father. They brought into question God's ability to meet Jesus' needs, and to protect him. Jesus was also tempted to doubt the wisdom of God's plan. The devil offered Jesus a 'better way' to achieve his goals. **"Worship me," says the devil, "And the rest will be easy. I'll see to it!"**

How often in our own wilderness times do we face similar temptations? We find ourselves questioning God's ability to meet our needs. We doubt his care and protection. We question the way he works in our lives.

There is a brighter side to this story though. At the end of this passage, we read these words:

**"He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."** The wilderness Jesus wandered in was not only lonely and barren, it was dangerous. Yet right there in the midst of it all - was God. The Father had not abandoned Jesus. He was right there. And when the time was right - when this time of testing was done, God's angels attended to Jesus.

We may think we're on our own in our wilderness times; that God is far away; that he doesn't care. But that is just our perception. The TRUTH is that God never ever abandons us. He never leaves us. And he is there to help us.

God shows his love in many ways. His angels are not necessarily radiant beings in white robes. God shows his love through the warmth of a friend or family member; through the love of his church; through the compassion of a stranger and sometimes - just sometimes - he grants us a tangible awareness of his presence.

In our early married days, when Jay was in between jobs, we made the decision to purchase a business. It was making concrete BBQs, pavers and incinerators. Though we did our due diligence, we were young, and didn't check thoroughly enough. We committed ourselves to the purchase, unaware that the head office of all the outlets that marketed our products had just said they would no longer carry our line. We'd only checked with a few

local outlets, who'd said as far as they were aware, all was good. After a year, the business was in the red and we were in serious trouble. We weren't able to sell the business as a going concern, so all we could do was sell the plant & equipment. It was old & shabby, but we put an optimistic price on it. We had a few nibbles, but nothing serious. We were looking at having to sell our newly purchased miner's cottage to pay off the overdraft. Then we had a call from someone in the Blue Mountains. He came, surveyed our plant & equipment, and paid what we were asking. He even gave us a healthy price for our rather tired truck. Amazingly, we were out of the red, and we kept our house!

I couldn't figure out why this man had been so generous. I wouldn't have bought the equipment! And there was something about him that was - well - HOLY. I wondered later, if he was an angel sent by God to deliver us. Wouldn't surprise me at all.

Lastly, from this story of Jesus in the wilderness, we learn something else - though it is in Luke's account, not Mark's. We read these words: **“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.”**

For Jesus, his journey into the desert was a necessary one. Through it, he became surer of his identity and of his mission. It caused him to recognise and repel the attacks of the evil one, and it taught him to rely completely on God. When Jesus returned to the world it was with a renewed sense of purpose and a closer walk with his Father. He was so empowered by the Holy Spirit that from that time on, Jesus began to perform miraculous healings, signs and wonders.

Wilderness times are never pleasant. But just like in the physical world, it's when we sit with the spiritual darkness - as we embrace it and allow ourselves to observe - that we will see things that we might otherwise miss. We will learn more about ourselves and about our God. We will also find that in time, like Jesus, we too can rise from these times in the power of the Spirit.

Let's pray...

God of the darkness, we thank you that you never abandon us. If, as we serve you, we find ourselves sinking into a dark place, give us your grace to persevere, to hold fast to what little we can, and to trust you to provide for us what we cannot provide for ourselves, as you gently lead us back into the light. Amen