

Washed, and Hung Out to Dry

[Mark 1:9-15]

K Karpen, Sunday, March 5, 2006
First Sunday in Lent
Sacrament of Holy Communion

[Mark 1:9-15, "Washed, and Hung Out to Dry," K Karpen, Sunday, March 5, 2006]

"A voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." And the spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness."

Welcome to Lent, our own 40 days in the spiritual wilderness. Lent, those 40 days before Easter, when the sureness of the coming of the resurrection contrasts with the dryness of everyday life. Lent, that old English word for spring, a form of the word "lengthen," the time when the days lengthen, even as they stay bitter & cold. Lent, when the sureness of the coming of spring contrasts with the bleakness of what we can actually see.

Mark does not tell us what season it was when Jesus goes through his Lent, his 40 days of spiritual dryness in the desert. Mark doesn't tell us much at all! No details! In a matter of 6 verses, Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan, claimed by a voice coming out of the heavens, and driven by the spirit out into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan, accompanied only by wild beasts and ministered to by angels. Jesus is washed, and then he's hung out to dry.

Jesus is washed in the life-giving waters of the Jordan; washed by the promise of baptism; washed by the spirit of God; washed by these words of divine love: "You are my child & I love you!" And then he's hung out to dry. Driven to the desert. Left in the wilderness.

Washed, and hung out to dry. Ever feel like that? I've had days like that. I've had years like that. A powerful moment of the presence and power of God in my life, only to be followed by profound dryness; deep dryness; wild wilderness. I don't know exactly where this wilderness was, where Jesus finds himself, this place of emptiness, this place of dryness, this unfamiliar terrain.

I don't spend much time out in the wilderness. I did go to Brooklyn yesterday. Because the 2 train wasn't running normally, I found myself on the A train. I got to the Jay Street stop, which was theoretically where I was going. But when I came up out of the subway, I had no idea at all where I was or where I should go. I looked around. The streets all had names. I don't think of myself as a parochial person. But what's wrong with numbers? I had this moment of fear & panic—no one was around; where was I? I'd been given directions, but I couldn't make them make sense. I felt a little washed & hung out to dry.

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So I started walking, and I quickly found I was almost where I belonged—only just around the corner, and I quickly found a familiar street, and I even found a familiar face, who took me by the hand and who took me where we were supposed to be.

Jesus has no such luck. He wanders in the wilderness for 40 days, not 4 minutes. The only companionship he has is from Satan and the wild beasts. No wonder he feels washed and hung out to dry. We do not hear a lot about Satan in Mark's version of the temptation—just a hint.

It's no wonder that Matthew and Luke embellish the tale and the character in their versions. Michael, Chris, and Carrie provided us more of a fleshed out version of this odd encounter as they performed Michael Blanc's play this morning. Mark keeps it simple. I wonder why. Maybe he figures we know something about this kind of encounter. Maybe Mark knows that, when we find ourselves in those dry, empty, deserted places, we have more than enough demons of our own to fill up the emptiness. We have our own share of wild beasts to lend their company.

We may have the demons of fear, guilt, inadequacy. They may be the demons of alcohol dependence. The demons of addiction of one kind and another. And we all have them, don't we? When you are in those dry, desperate desert places, my hunch is you don't have to look far to find wild beasts of one sort or another. How vulnerable we are! How vulnerable. Wherever we are, wherever we live. And we're all alone with them. Or are we?

We know we've been washed. We know we've had waters of love poured on our heads. Maybe in baptism; maybe in some other way. We've been water-washed! We've been spirit-born! We've been assured of God's intense, unrelenting love for us, pride in us. "You are my child; you are my beloved. I am so pleased about you!" That's what God says. That's what God says.

But still! When we find ourselves in the wilderness, God's love doesn't keep the demons away. It doesn't keep the beasts at bay. It didn't do it for Jesus. It doesn't do it for us. Jesus is washed! But he's hung out to dry. Alone! Except for the demons & the beasts. We're washed! But we're hung out to dry. With just our demons and our beasts!

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But there are angels. What? There are angels. Mark slips that in. Right at the end. It's not even a sentence; it's a phrase. Maybe it's an afterthought. The demons & beasts are not the end of the story. "And the angels were waiting on him. And the angels were ministering to him. And the angels were looking out for him. Doing God's work in his life.

Well, that's fine for Jesus. Of course he has angels for waiters. I don't even know what an angel is. You don't even know what an angel is. We don't even know what an angel is. Or do we? Look around. You may not see anyone you know. You may not see anyone you recognize. You may not see anybody who cares about you. You may not see anyone capable of doing God's work in you. And you know what? You may be wrong. You may just be wrong.

And, as long as God's around, none of us is ever washed & hung out to dry. As long as God's around, none of us will ever be washed & hung out to dry. Oh, we'll be in the wilderness. We'll be alone with our demons & beasts. And that will never, never be the end of the story.