

**Reflection on the Gospel-1st Sunday in Lent Year B
(Mark 1:12-15)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Lent comes around each year and presents us with its usual challenge to take stock of our lives, to see more clearly what is in our hearts, and to discover what might be calling us out of our comfort zones. It is a time to consider how we might respond to the pain of the world and of its inhabitants. It is a time for personal as well as group reflection, a time for entering into “the wilderness” and for grappling with the mysteries of life. It is a time of preparation for Easter when we will renew our baptismal vows and celebrate the greatest mysteries of our faith.

The gospel reading invites us to reflect on Jesus’ forty-day experience in “the wilderness”. Jesus is said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” and, like so many human beings before and since, is “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness of life to be “tested” there. [“Tested” is a more accurate translation of the original Greek term than is “tempted”]. Forty is a symbolic number in Israel’s story: the great flood lasts forty days and forty nights; Moses spends forty days and forty nights on the mountain of God; Israel wanders for forty years in the wilderness; King David reigns for forty years; the prophet Elijah travels forty days and forty nights in the wilderness on his way to the mountain of God.

The wilderness of Judah, with its unique desert flora and fauna, its wadis and waterholes, is ever so real. At the same time it functions symbolically in the narrative. In Israel’s story, it is the place of testing for God’s people: “Remember the long way that your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness... testing you to know what was in your heart” (Deuteronomy 8:2). Jesus now passes the tests that Israel failed in the wilderness.

Jesus is “with the wild beasts”. This terse statement recalls the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a future time of reconciliation and harmony when “the wolf will lie down with the lamb” (Isaiah 11:6-9). Jesus is presented as the one who ushers in that age of peace and healing of division. God’s agents care for him in his time of testing: “angels minister to him”. In this context, Jesus announces the coming of God’s empire or reign. His message is to “repent” or to “think beyond” in a way that might turn lives around in God’s direction, and to “believe the good news” that he is set to proclaim in word and action. At a time of growing divide between the mega-rich and the desperately poor, we might look back to our symbolic tradition and forward to ways of bringing good news to those mostly deeply affected by the inequities in our world.