

Mark 1:9-15

South Plains
March 1, 2009

Driven To Wait

“And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.

I love the realism of that hymn because it addresses both the devil that Jesus faced in the wilderness and the devils that we face, especially when we are driven to wait. That's where we are as a congregation. We have a mission, a job to do, a clear goal to accomplish in the construction of Kirk Hall. But, we are on hold as we wait for Albemarle County's approval.

In these opening verses of Mark's gospel, Jesus is baptized and commissioned as the Son of God, the Beloved in whom God is well pleased. It's time to get to work proclaiming the kingdom of God and building his church. But, instead, he is driven into the wilderness to wait for 40 days. We have a little less than 40 days before we meet with the Planning Commission. We have

drawings, some money and lots of enthusiasm. What we don't have is the blessing of the county government. I'm told we have an uphill journey because the Planning staff still has some concerns, even after eight months of discussion and three submissions of our plans. The church will need your help and prayers in order to gain county approval despite those staff concerns.

This is not the place to argue our case, but I want to point out that our frustration at waiting for construction to begin is not unusual. Waiting is not only typical for churches that want to build. Waiting is also typical for the way God prepares his people for greater service. Think of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land. Think of Elijah waiting 40 days in the cave before another victory for Israel.

Life routinely requires a period of waiting before great events. The teenager knows how to drive but must wait for a driver's license. A couple in love waits for their wedding day. The business person has a plan, but must wait for the loan. A family wants a child and waits for the adoption to come through. And, we've all sat in the waiting room, waiting for the doctor.

This waiting is not a frustration for Jesus. It's a test. When Matthew and Luke tell this story, they describe the test as temptations to sin. But, in Mark's gospel, no temptations are specified. And, the same word can mean either tempted or tested. I suggest that

Jesus is being tested in his determination, in his sense of mission, in his endurance, and in his faith.

Mark describes a battle royal with Jesus in the middle. On one side is the Holy Spirit and God's angels. On the other side is Satan and the wild beasts. Jesus' baptism and the blessing of the Holy Spirit will not protect him from the rigors and hardships of his mission. Throughout the gospel, he will be questioned, and attacked and finally killed. Before a fighter pilot is sent into combat, he undergoes a training to simulate what he might face if his plane goes down and he is captured and interrogated. Jesus' time in the wilderness is combat training.

Too often when someone becomes a Christian, is baptized and joins the church, they have been told only the positive side of the Christian life. We tell them about the very real blessings and joys of following Christ. We do not always tell them that following Jesus may subject them to frustration, or hardship, or even opposition. Even when we are beloved by God, we can expect our faith to be tested. Even when we have a mission or a personal ambition that seems in every way to have God's blessing, we can expect to be tested.

The harsh conditions of the wilderness are not where we want to be and nor where we want to find God. But, again and again the wilderness is where God shows up to test and refine our courage. Many successful people recall a period of struggle that they credit with

giving them the courage and endurance needed to succeed later. The Spirit drives Jesus, not to work and to succeed, but to wait and be tested.

In this gospel, Satan is silent. That silent opposition can be the hardest to deal with because we can't know exactly how to meet it. Doubt and questions arise. I remember finishing seminary, but not having a call to a church. I took a job cutting brush for a company that trained dogs to sniff out booby traps for the army. One of the supervisors approached me about going to Japan to learn how to train the dogs. It was an interesting test that clarified for me God's call to the ministry.

I wonder what thoughts went through Jesus' mind as he waited day after day. The wilderness of Palestine is not like a jungle or like one of our heavily forested national parks. It has more in common with the desert, rocky, inhospitable terrain where robbers and wild beasts prey on careless travelers. Wilderness is a setting that offers time to think and reason to re-think your life.

Hebrews 12:6 says "the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts." God's intent is to preserve and to strengthen us by means of discipline. For that reason, he provided angels to wait on Jesus. Angels come in many forms to provide for our needs. Sometimes it's a matter of waiting for the angel to appear. Sometimes it's simply that we need to open our eyes to see the angel God has sent.

The Lord's Supper is one provision God offers regularly to sustain our faith, to nourish our souls, to remind us of God's love, and to rekindle our love for God. We call this the Lord's Table because Christ is our host, waiting on us just as the angels waited on him. The curious thing about hospitality is that the host, the person in charge of the house who may in fact have a host of servants to obey his commands, this person accepts the responsibility of waiting on the needs of the guest. If the guest is tired, the host offers refreshment. If the guest is hungry, the host offers nourishment. If the guest is upset or worried or even sick, it is the generous host who insists on trying to make things right.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6, the Lord commands Israel and us to keep the Sabbath by resting because, he says, "You were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there." We don't work on Sunday because we need to remember that we are no longer slaves. We gather at this table in remembrance of One who gave his life to teaching love and bringing peace with God. And the One we call Lord waits on us here, with all our frustration and weariness with waiting, just as the angels waited on him.

The wait will not last forever. Soon, in only 40 days, Jesus was announcing that the time is fulfilled, that the good news of God has arrived, and that the kingdom is near. We don't have to wait to proclaim that good news ourselves.