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A Wilderness Community

Mark 1:13

A recent television documentary described Harvard University's Masters in Business Administration program. Those who are admitted begin by celebrating that they are part of an elite group who will have the opportunity to become future leaders in American business. But by the time they arrive on campus they are feeling a high level of anxiety. They know that they are going to be challenged in ways that go far beyond anything they have ever experienced. They soon discover what that means. They are given a workload that cannot be managed in an 18-hour day. They literally have to choose between being prepared for class and getting a reasonable amount of sleep.

One of the purposes of the program is to place students in a situation of crisis. What they learn from grappling with crisis is just as important as the subject matter they are expected to master. After placing the students in crisis, the program provides the one essential resource that will enable them to cope with it. Everything they do is to happen in the context of a learning team. The team forms the life raft which keeps them afloat. The team empowers its members to accomplish far more than they ever thought they could. The team becomes a community which supports its members in crisis. It is the severity of the test that enables the students to learn the value of the community that has been given to them.

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel we read about the testing that Jesus undergoes in preparation for his ministry. Mark describes Jesus' baptism as the moment that confirms Jesus' call to ministry and his special relationship with God. But the necessary next step in the process is a time of preparation in the wilderness where Jesus will be tested as he has never been tested before. Like any true test it is a time when Jesus is not in control. Mark tells us that the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness where he will encounter Satan, the enemy of God and the one who opposes Jesus' ministry.

But even in the menacing context of the wilderness and its challenging test, God provides the necessary resources. In the wilderness Jesus is surrounded by a supportive community. Mark tells us that Jesus was "with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him (Mark 1:13)." Commentators do not agree about the role of the wild beasts in this passage. Some in the ancient world believed demons dwelt in the beasts. It may be that the presence of the wild beasts were part of the ordeal that confronted Jesus. But it is also possible to see the wild beasts as part of the community that gave Jesus strength in this trying time.

There can certainly be no doubt that Mark's reference to the angels waiting on Jesus is a description of the support system provided to him in the wilderness. Mark makes it clear that the angels did not wait until it was all over to bind up his wounds and nurse him back to health. The angels were with him through the entire ordeal. They helped him to face down the tempter. Their support enabled Jesus to get through this threatening crisis. When he leaves the wilderness he will understand that the community of disciples which he will build is absolutely essential to his ministry. They will be a wilderness community which can stand up to any test.

This is a truth that was recognized by the church reformers of the 16th century. They understood the nature of Jesus' journey to the wilderness to be tested in ways he could not control. For them the journey to the wilderness began as they saw the Old Church collapsing around them. It continued as they looked for a new vision of what the church is called to be. A young priest named Huldrych Zwingli led this process in Zurich. The decisive moment of church reform took place in 1523 when the city council agreed to a public disputation to decide the future of the church. Diarmaid MacCulloch has described that event in these words:

This was a remarkable occasion. Zurich had no university, nor was Zwingli a monk, so it did not follow the traditional format of the disputations which had figured so prominently in Luther's progress towards revolution. The proceedings were not in Latin but in German, so that the city councilors could understand what was going on. Suddenly the city community, the Commonwealth, was taking on itself to decide the future of its religious life and what it believed, without any reference to the Church dignitaries present—who, in angry awareness of this startling novelty, did not deign to give the occasion respectability by speaking in defense of traditional religion. Accordingly, Zwingli's views won by default, and because of the influential secular backing which he now enjoyed. The Bible was declared to be the only source of doctrine which the city council was prepared to accept (*The Reformation: A History*, page 145).

This momentous decision could never have been made if Zwingli had not been willing to make his journey to the wilderness. The pivotal wilderness moment took place about a year earlier. It was the first Sunday of Lent in 1522. On that day, Zwingli was part of a group of twelve reformers who gathered together in the home of a Zurich printer. The host cut up a sausage and distributed the pieces to his guests. Everyone but Zwingli the priest ate some sausage. The rules for fasting during Lent in the Old Church banned the consumption of meat. What they did that day created a public scandal. But it also provided Zwingli with a preaching opportunity. He used the scandal to make the point that the Bible does not teach that we should give up meat or anything else during Lent. This is a rule created by church leaders which could either be observed or not observed according to the dictates of conscience.

This event and the preaching that followed began a process by which the people of Zurich re-examined the nature of the church in the light of Scripture. What was happening in Zurich soon spread throughout the region. It happened because Zwingli found a community in the wilderness which was willing to help him imagine a different kind of future.

This kind of process was at work among the founders of this congregation in 1835. A group of Presbyterians responded to the tragedy of slavery in America by organizing an abolitionist congregation which could imagine and work for a different kind of future. They knew they were forming a wilderness community. They understood what Zwingli and the other reformers meant when they called the church to a more ancient and profound understanding of Lent. In the early church Lent was the season when new believers were prepared to be baptized into the church. In 1 Peter 3 the early church is encouraged to see this process as a spiritual preparation for difficult times ahead. This is true of our baptism, too. In a time of great upheaval we are grounded in a wilderness community that is far more resilient than we can imagine.