

February 18, Lent 1B (Mark 1:9-15)

What good is a wilderness experience?

by [E. Carrington Heath](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue

Every Ash Wednesday I talk about Lent as a journey that we take with God for the 40 days before Easter. A few days later, on the first Sunday of Lent, I am reminded that the number 40 isn't arbitrary. In the Bible, Jesus goes out into the wilderness for 40 days, where he wrestles with faith and doubt. Mark says he is "tempted by Satan," evil personified.

Forty days of being tested and tempted in the wilderness. At the end of it, Jesus emerges, but it doesn't really get any easier. The greatest challenges are still to come.

You and I know how the story goes from here. We are journeying toward Easter. But to get to Easter you have to go through the cross and the tomb. Scholars debate how much Jesus knows at this early point in the story. I don't know if he understands exactly how it will all go down, but I think he knows something big is about to happen. Something is coming that will test his will and resolve and faithfulness.

I think it's telling that before that time comes, he takes 40 days and he gets lost.

The wilderness Jesus is driven into by the Spirit is a literal wilderness. He actually goes out to a physical place where few people go. But he is out there spiritually too, and this is perhaps even scarier. Spiritual wilderness is a place where few people ever dare to go.

After all, who wants to go into the wilderness? I'm not talking about camping and hiking; I'm talking about real wilderness here, where we wrestle with ourselves, and our spirit, and our relationship with God. What good is it? You can't put it on a résumé. It doesn't earn you any money. It doesn't really make your life easier; it may even make it harder. So why would you do it?

But that's exactly what Lent asks of us. For 40 days we are asked to go into a wilderness place and to prepare ourselves for the journey of discipleship. Lent asks us to wrestle with the hard stuff: to pray, to fast, to do something new. To face temptation and to choose to follow Christ anyway.

It's not popular. Crowds will show up at church on Easter morning, but few will have spent the last 40 days getting ready. Everyone likes a party; not everyone likes setting up for it. But those of us who choose to make this 40-day wilderness journey may discover something meaningful along the way: Christ is there, too. We've often been in the wilderness, but now we've found that we're not alone.

That's good news, because the reality of our lives is that we spend a lot of time lost. We spend a lot of time facing temptation and wrestling with God, a lot of time alone with our demons. Jesus knew what that was like. So in Lent we have the opportunity to spend 40 days not alone but with one who has been there before.

Have you ever had a hard time with faith? Jesus knew what that was like. Do you struggle to make hard choices? So did Jesus. Are you grieving? Jesus grieved, too. Are you preparing yourself for something new, something you don't know how you are going to survive? Jesus knew what that was like, too.

I'm convinced that when we go through these wilderness times, God looks at us with nothing but compassion and love. After all, God watched God's own child go through such a time, too.

There's more good news, too. Because sometimes our wilderness places can do more than challenge us. They can change us.

I used to live in Vermont, right next door to the Green Mountain National Forest. My GPS and cell phone didn't work out there, but I'd still drive the dirt paths looking for a fly fishing spot. I'd literally get lost. And every time I did, I thought, *OK, I've gone too far this time*. But that was when I always saw something of beauty. I always saw a hidden piece of God's creation that few ever get to see. I would catch just a glimpse of God's greatness.

Sometimes we have to get lost before we find the beauty that surrounds us. It can take going to the hard places, the desolate places, the painful places, for us to find joy. Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom before we can find the solid ground of our being.

I think Lent is a season for discoveries like that. I also think church is the place to do it. It's one of the only places in our culture where we can say this to one another: We are traveling up a wilderness path right now. Let's do it together. And even if it means going farther into this wilderness, even if we feel more lost than ever, let's follow the one who has been here before. He might not lead us down easy paths, but he will never lead us astray.