

February 18, Lent 1B (Mark 1:9–15)

## **Does Jesus hide from the wild beasts? Hurl rocks at them? Mark doesn't say.**

by [Elizabeth Felicetti](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

Sometimes I wish I could engage in a writing workshop with Mark so I could critique his biblical accounts. Your readers need more detail, I would tell him. We need scenes. I'd especially like to offer him feedback on his report of Christ's temptation in the desert, which in Mark's short gospel comes in the early verses of the first chapter, whereas Matthew and Luke each wait to share this story until chapter 4. Mark describes the entire incident in one verse, while the other two synoptic gospels take 11 to 13.

Slow down, I could tell Mark. I understand that he was in a hurry because of the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple, but for me as a writer, the magic happens in the revision, and Mark seems to have skipped that part in his haste to get his account into the world.

On the other hand, in his brevity Mark packs a punch with powerful verbs. During Jesus' baptism, Mark writes that the heavens are torn open. He deliberately evokes Isaiah 64:1, "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The verb *tear* suggests a violent in-breaking, not a peaceful scene with a bird. With just one word, Mark accomplishes much with his listeners, showing that Christ fulfills the hopes of the Old Testament.

After the brief baptism scene, Mark states that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, while Luke says Jesus was "filled by" the Spirit and Matthew writes that the Spirit "led" him. While Mark may be short on scenes, the words he picks offer intrigue. Does being driven by the Spirit mean that Jesus does not enthusiastically embrace his time of testing? Would he have preferred to prepare for his public ministry in a different way? Does he resist going to the wilderness, necessitating a driving force?

And of course the part about the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness is preceded by Mark's favorite word, *immediately*, an adverb he uses as much as the other three gospel writers combined. This marks the first appearance of *immediately* in Mark: the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness immediately after his baptism.

Mark's next verse encapsulates the entire 40-day period of testing, which both Matthew and Luke spend several verses depicting, including dialogue with the devil. Mark uses the word *Satan*, while the other two say "the devil." While I miss the scenes with the devil in Matthew and Luke, I'm intrigued by Mark's use of Satan.

Since I can't offer Mark feedback, and because of his few, carefully chosen words, his gospel lends itself to imaginative rumination.

Does John the Baptist notice the tearing open of the heavens? How could he miss something so violent? And if the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness, does that mean right after he comes up from the waters, while his robe is still wet? Does John stand in the water under torn-apart heavens staring at Jesus being driven away, or does he just move right on to the next person in line? Is there anyone else waiting to be baptized? Mark doesn't say.

And why Satan, which means "adversary," instead of the devil? Satan certainly evokes Job, and maybe that's what Mark was going for. If so, I want to know more. Is the testing like the scenes in Matthew and Luke, or is it more Job-like? Job never interacts with Satan directly. Mark doesn't even say that Jesus fasts. Maybe he sits in an ash heap like Job, scraping sores off of his body. Maybe Satan leads Jesus to believe that terrible things have happened to his family.

What is with the wild beasts? Are they friendly to Jesus? Wild beasts in the wilderness don't sound friendly to me, even if Jesus is some kind of beast charmer. I imagine them in Satan's employ, menacing Jesus over the 40 days. Being bereft of details makes the wild beasts somehow scarier, as in movies where the monster is suggested more than revealed. Is Jesus scared of the wild beasts? Does he hide from them? Hurl rocks at them? Does he slay any of them?

Finally, the angels waiting on Jesus: this detail is in Matthew as well. What strikes me most is that the verb *wait on* comes from the same root word for *deacons*. I think of the deacons I've known in my ministry in the Episcopal Church, in particular one I served with for over ten years. I see this waiting on Jesus as gentle, certainly, as service. But deacons are also prophetic and call us to service in the world. I can't

help crediting those angels just a little bit for encouraging Christ to leave the terrors of the wilderness so that he could begin his ministry in Galilee.

I wonder how Mark would respond to me in a writing workshop. Maybe he would tell me that leaving so much to my imagination was his goal.