

## Desert Transformation

Mark 1:9-15



Our Australian deserts are surprisingly lush. Small shrubs grow, stunted trees might be visible. At the right time of year, it can be full of flowers. It might be hard to find water, the rain might be infrequent enough to meet the definition of a desert, but life abounds, sometimes in the most surprising of places. In the days before air conditioning, the people of settlements, such as Forrest, would gather on the hot days around the blow-holes that would have the cool air breathing up from the hidden caverns under the Nullarbor. Build a

shelter over a blow hole and there is a natural cooling system, even on the hottest of days.



The desert of Israel is a completely different story. Desert, wilderness, it is the same word. It is dry and sandy. Even in the midst of winter there is not enough water to keep plants alive. Deep wells are the key to survival. In surprising clefts between rocky hills, unexpected streams lead to a wadi, which gives life. It is only in these hidden crevasses that food can be

grown. The presence of the stream is a surprise. To me it is hardly surprising that in Hebrew the word "wadi" also means "gift."

In Hebrew thinking, deserts were a special place, a place of transformation. They also represent a crossing over between life events.



When Israel flees Egypt, they wander in the desert for 40 years. Later the stories tell of Elijah fleeing for his life into the desert. Isaiah sings of a road through the desert for the Exiles to come home. Through the testing and trials of a desert, the people are refined before they enter the Promised Land.

Perhaps this is why the Hebrew word for desert is "midbar," which derives from "dabar," the Hebrew word for speak, or word. It is in the desert – the midbar – that one speaks with God. More correctly, in being in the desert, removed from the normal grind of life, that one can more effectively hear God.

For those of us who have lived our lives in the relative comfort of lush climates, we might not choose to visit the desert. Perhaps in our culture we would, complete with a tour guide and a well-stocked four-wheel drive, but on our own? Would we really choose to go to the unforgiving desert?

Perhaps Jesus felt the same. The Holy Spirit that in the Baptism story appeared as a gentle dove, now drives him out into the desert. The word used here is a forceful word – the same word that is later used to describe Jesus casting out demons. The Holy Spirit casts Jesus out into the desert like a demon! We might well wonder what is going on here.

We might also wonder about the testing that happens in the wilderness. In our English translations, we hear of Jesus being tested by “Satan,” however that is a misunderstanding of the Hebrew word. I won't go into all the background, but the Satan is a person with a particular role – the Accuser. Sometimes this is like the public prosecutor in a court of law. Other times, the Satan is the person being the “devil's advocate.” We all too often need people to raise the issues, to shine a mirror on us and on our potential decisions, not because they disagree with them, but rather to help us think through the issues. I am sure we have all been on committees where no one raised an objection and decisions were waved through, much to the detriment of the group. So the Accuser is an important role that we need to help us hear more clearly what God is saying to us, rather than what we want God to be saying to us in the desert of our lives.

A final point to consider is the immediacy of the three events in today's Gospel reading. When we read our Gospels, it is rather too easy to overlook the word “immediately.” It occurs reasonably frequently and we often ignore it. How did you respond to today's reading? BANG!

That's not a literal translation, of course, but I think it does get over the meaning of the text much more clearly than some of our more traditional translations. There is no chance to dawdle off into other directions, these first two stories are depicted as happening in quick succession.

So what does all this mean for us today? We often find our expectations turned upside-down. The gentle spirit-dove throws us out with violence, the character, assumed to be an evil one, challenges us to build our relationship with God. Things are not as they seemed. Somehow in all that, messengers from God are ministering to Jesus. In a parched desert, full of mirages from the heat, things are not what they seem either.

This is all surprising, all unexpected. In this confusing space, can we also hear the message that the reign of God is near us? This important theme is one that Mark develops – the reign of God is both now and not yet. Are we aware and open to it? I wonder what preparation or discipleship we need in order to encounter God's reign in some of those unexpected places in our lives.

The story goes on from here to the calling of the first disciples, who left their nets and followed Jesus. How can we be better prepared to invite people into a new relationship with God as Jesus did.

