

The Spiritual Landscape of Mark

Bonnie B. Thurston



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by David Manahan, OSB. "Transfiguration," Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Attributed to Theophanes the Greek.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2008 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thurston, Bonnie Bowman.

The spiritual landscape of Mark / Bonnie B. Thurston.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-1864-6 (pbk.)

1. Bible. N.T. Mark—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Bible. N.T. Mark—Geography. 3. Sacred space. I. Title.

BS2585.52.T48 2008

226.3'06—dc22

2008017770

In gratitude for the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Cross
Tymawr Convent, Lydart, Wales

and for Esther de Waal
who introduced me to Tymawr and to so many who have
immeasurably enriched my life

Contents

Map of Roman Palestine	vi
Introduction	vii
Chapter 1: The Wilderness and the Desert/Chaos and Comfort Mark 1:1-14; 1:35-39; 6:31, 35	1
Chapter 2: The House and the Sea/Stability and Transition Mark 2–7	15
Chapter 3: The Valley/Journey and Pilgrimage Mark 8:22–10:52	26
Chapter 4: The Mountain/Vision and Mystery Mark 9:2-13 (3:13; 6:46 and 11:1; 13:3)	36
Excursus: Icon of the Transfiguration	44
Chapter 5: The City/Temptation and Corruption Mark 11–15	49
Chapter 6: The Cross/Suffering, Solitariness, and Solidarity Mark 14–15	60
Chapter 7: The Garden/Resurrection . . . Perhaps Mark 14:32-42; 16:1-8	70
Notes	80



Introduction



Tend only to the birth in you and you will find all goodness and all consolation, all delight, all being, and all truth. . . . What comes to you in this birth brings with it pure being and blessing.

—Meister Eckhart

Genesis

The genesis of this book was a series of retreat talks given to the sisters of the Society of the Sacred Cross at their beautiful, mysterious Tymawr convent. The talks were given in the chapel, and I hope something of its power and serenity might be reflected here for you. Also, I hope the sisters will accept this book as a very small token of my gratitude to them. In “writing up” the talks, I have tried to preserve their oral character, so I take the liberty of speaking in the first person and addressing you directly. I am hopeful that you might make reading the chapters “little retreats.” To that end, I have prefaced each with the prayer I used at Tymawr. I think you will find the material most fruitful if you first read the texts of Mark to which I refer. Please don’t skip this because you are “familiar with the story.” We all think we know the Jesus stories. But sometimes when the guide points out something different, or we look from an unusual perspective, we see something new.

I hope my reading of Mark’s text is fresh. I approach the geographical locations in Mark (desert, house, lake, mountain, valley,

city, etc.) as symbols (sometimes from a Jungian perspective, but often more generally from the literature of mythology) and then use the symbols as entrances to the text and the life of Jesus. Having written a commentary on Mark, I felt familiar enough with the text and the scholarly discussion around it to experiment with this approach. While you will find scholarship here (I hope!), I have tried very hard not to allow it to weigh down the discussions. For me, looking at the life of Jesus through the symbolic lens of its landscape made St. Mark's gospel dance. It also made startling and challenging connections to my own journey, connections I had not seen before. So before we begin the journey Jesus makes in St. Mark's gospel, a word about the symbolic use of landscape and about the background of St. Mark is in order.

Landscape

When we look at the religious history of the human family, we find that people have "located" holiness in time, space, and persons. In the world's great religions we encounter feasts and seasons of the year, places considered holy, and saints. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*: "It is well to have specifically holy places, and things, and days, for, without these focal points or reminders, the belief that all is holy and 'big with God' will soon dwindle into a mere sentiment."¹ This little book invites you to think about the holiness of space/place/landscape and of its symbolic meaning in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Please note that already Jesus is designated by the place from which he comes.

From the beginning of human history, there has been a spirituality of landscape. Most fundamentally, God is "up." The Evil One is "down." God, therefore, lives on mountains. Zeus lived on Mount Olympus. Ba'al was the god of the mountains. We may see a reflection of this "in a mirror darkly" in the beloved Psalm 121. El-Shaddai of the Old Testament may be a vestigial memory of Ba'al. Even YHWH's house was built on the Temple Mount, Mount Zion. Likewise, the "Evil One" is "down," so journeys in the underworld are fraught with special danger.

Individually, we, too, are shaped by our geography, the landscapes of our origins. A “city person” and a “country person” are often superficially quite different. Mountain people are different from plains dwellers or those who live on seacoasts. One reason the sea represents chaos in much biblical writing is that the Hebrews weren’t (as the Phoenicians, for example, were) coastal dwellers. I grew up in the “hollers” (narrow valleys between mountains) of West Virginia, and when I first visited the Great Plains, all that sky made me nervous. Where I grew up we didn’t see much sky, and often the sun didn’t “rise” until midmorning. In the United States, Northerners and Southerners or Easterners and Westerners exhibit different cultural characteristics which I, as an Easterner, learned very quickly when I married a “pioneer” from the West Coast. This is true in the United Kingdom as well. My friends from Cornwall are quite different from my “Geordie” friends. The Scots and the Welsh are related but distinct. My point is that place shapes person.

Place also shapes the prayer life of a person. Writing on July 2, 1948 the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, reflecting on the light and landscape around his monastery observed: “I looked at all this in great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet. For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation. . . .”² Yes. In itself landscape inspires us. But it is also one of the ways God reveals the Divine Self, as even that consummate urbanite, St. Paul, recognized. Writing to those in the city of Rome Paul says: “For what can be known about God is plain . . . because God has shown it. . . . Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:19-20). Landscape reflects or shows forth its Creator. Landscape is also symbolic or metaphorical, pointing beyond, through itself to other things. And it is that aspect of landscape that was the genesis of this book.

I have a great devotion to Charles de Foucauld, the extraordinary French monk and missionary to North Africa. Something he wrote during the time he lived in Nazareth and worked as a handyman for the Poor Clares’ convent there stimulated the idea from which this material arose. Foucauld observed:

. . . God either calls you to him from Nazareth, as he did with our father St. Joseph . . . or calls you to the desert as he did with your brother Jesus, or calls you to public life, as he has also done for your brother Jesus. . . .

In your heart of hearts don't attach yourself to any of these three ways of life . . . since all three are equally perfect. Be equally ready to take up at the slightest word from God the one among the three which he wishes.³

In the passage Foucauld is using "place" or "landscape," in this case Nazareth, the desert, "public life," metaphorically for *types* of life or what we Christians term "callings" or "vocations."

Foucauld's remark led me to think about the "geography" of the life of Jesus. Jesus' life was lived out in a series of real places that have symbolic significance: cave, refugee journey, Jewish village, desert, Gentile villages, lakeside, mountain, on the road down a valley, city, hill, garden. And if one is even slightly aware of the symbolic meaning or Jungian archetypes, such "places" are easily associated with states in the inner life. This is particularly interesting since St. Mark, the writer of the first canonical gospel, uses geography to structure his account and makes his theological points via the narrative he creates. And, of course, then St. Matthew and St. Luke (and to some extent even St. John) follow suit.

Mark

To test this "landscape theory," I thought immediately of St. Mark's gospel both because it is the first gospel and because I spent several years writing a commentary on it and think I am beginning to understand what the amazing writer and theologian Mark was "up to."⁴ Almost all commentators think that Mark uses the geographical references in his gospel to indicate the great movements in the ministry of Jesus. The prologue of the story, the ministry of John the Baptist, occurs in the wilderness (1:1-13). The villages, sea, and mountains of Galilee (1:14-6:13) are the scenes of the early and popular ministry of Jesus from which he moves "beyond Galilee" (6:14-8:26) and

into strange, foreign territory. The central section of the gospel, in which Jesus teaches those who follow him what discipleship means (8:27–10:52), is narrated as a journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, a long trip down the Jordan River valley. And the story climaxes in the city of Jerusalem (11:1–16:8). Within that general framework, Mark writes summary passages to indicate “where we are” in the narrative, and he uses geography symbolically and theologically.

Clearly geography is theological for Mark. Galilee represents an ethnically and racially diverse area in which Jesus’ ministry is enthusiastically embraced by the people. Caesarea Philippi, a Gentile/Greco-Roman area is where Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, thus reinforcing the evangelist’s interest in the Gentile mission as he shows Jesus’ concern for those “outside Israel.” Jesus takes selected disciples “up” a mountain where he is transfigured. Ironically, for Mark, Jerusalem, the place of official religion, the temple, the Holy of Holies, represents opposition to Jesus and religious corruption, *not* the holiest place in Roman Palestine. The more one thinks about Mark’s way of telling the Jesus story, the more important the “spiritual landscape” becomes (as I hope this book will demonstrate).

As you read this book, it may help you to know that I hold a very traditional position about the origin of Mark’s gospel. Along with the universal witness of the early Church and Greek Fathers, I think Mark was written by an associate of St. Peter in the city of Rome around the time of the Neronian persecution of AD 54–68. This is more or less also the position of Father John Donahue, SJ, an eminent American Markan scholar and author of the Mark commentary in the *Sacra Pagina* series.⁵ Like Paul’s letter to the Romans, with which it has many affinities, the Gospel of Mark was written for a “mixed” Christian community of Jews and Gentiles who faced or had recently faced persecution. Mark’s gospel is written for those who suffer. In it John the Baptist preached, was delivered up, and was martyred. Likewise, Jesus preached, was delivered up, and was martyred, and raised on the third day by God. Disciples “follow” (the technical term for discipleship in the gospel) their Lord, so can expect to preach, be delivered up, martyred *and* vindicated by God. That was and is a hopeful pattern. It says that after our suffering,

God gives us greater life. Mark's is a gospel, and this is a book, that does not turn away from the fact of suffering.

By literary genre, Mark is a popular work written in *koine* Greek, the *lingua franca* of a large part of the Roman Empire. Its audience was common people, which may be why it seems so "available" to many modern Christians. Some New Testament scholars place it in the technical literary category of "folktale," since nobody official, Jewish, Roman, or Apostolic, comes off very well in the narrative. For our purposes that is enough background information about Mark, although reading the chapter on Mark in a good New Testament introduction or a commentary on Mark would enrich your understanding of this gospel. Two commentaries that are particularly helpful for general readers are Morna D. Hooker's *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (1991) and D. E. Nineham's *The Gospel of St. Mark* (1963).

If you glance at the contents of this book, you will see that what I propose to do is to trace Mark's life of Jesus by geography. That is, with the exception of the chapter on the cross, which is somewhat differently focused, I reflect on the location of a particular section of Jesus' life and relate that location to both what it symbolizes and to its function in Mark's view of Jesus and the gospel. To give you a sense of how this works (and so you will know whether to put the book down at this point), I want to begin our journey through the spiritual landscape of Jesus' life with a location that doesn't appear explicitly in Mark's gospel, but that it must assume: the cave.

The Cave

Christmas cards and sentimental carols aside, Jesus was almost certainly born in a cave. If you have had the privilege of visiting the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, you very much have the sense of this as you descend the narrow stairs, down below the floor of the nave to the silver star of the traditional place of the birth. Similarly, there is a church built into a cave on the way out of Bethlehem beloved by the local people and known as the "Milk Grotto," the place where, traditionally, Mary nursed Jesus as the Holy Family

began its flight to Egypt and joined the long procession of Palestine's refugees.

The locus of the cave is vitally important for us as an archetype of beginnings, of the maternal womb. Caves feature in myths of origin, rebirth, and initiation in many, many cultures. It is an ambiguous image because the cave can both symbolize the nurturing womb and the gloomy pit, the "below place" where monsters, devils, and evil dwell. It symbolizes the unconscious and its unexpected dangers as well as the "Sun Gate" or "Cosmic Eye" from which one emerges from darkness into light.⁶ Reflecting on the Paleolithic cave paintings in France, Bede Griffiths in his book *The Golden String* speaks of the cave as a foundational locus of human spirituality:

. . . from the earliest times of which we have any knowledge, it seems to have been understood that our life in this world is a journey toward God. The journey is from the mouth of the cave, which represents the external world, into the interior which appears as darkness; it is the passage from the outer to the inner world. It is this journey which is represented by the descent of Aeneas into the underworld in search of his father.⁷

Griffiths continues by discussing this pattern in the *Odyssey* and in the legend of Theseus. "All these stories," he asserts, "are symbols of the same mystery of the search for God which is at the same time the return to our true home. It is represented sometimes as a new birth, a return to the womb, or again as a descent into the tomb by which we rise again to a new life."⁸ Paradoxically, the life of Jesus began at the culmination of humanity's spiritual journey. He comes out of the cave, the mystery of darkness, and brings with him light.

To begin in a cave is to begin at the beginning, to begin in the liminal space between earth and underworld. Jesus was born in a cave, and buried in a cave, and from a cave was reborn in resurrection life, the firstborn of many, Paul assures us. To begin in a cave is to begin with the mystery of silence. Certainly Jesus' life began with the great mystery of Mary's "overshadowing" by the Holy Spirit, the great silence of "How can these things be?" To begin in a cave is to begin with the

mystery of identity: Jesus' identity as the heavenly One born from the earthly womb and, indeed, the mystery of our own uniqueness as we emerged from our own mother's wombs and have developed and entered into the process of shedding an external identity for an eternal one, a process at the heart of all spiritual journeys. To begin in a cave is to begin with what Evelyn Underhill in *The Spiritual Life* called our "amphibious life:" spirit and body, earth and heaven.⁹

To be of cave origin, to be womb born, is to be compassionate. In Semitic languages the root *rahim*, which is often translated "compassionate," means "womb," the maternal space of nurture from which we move into light. As Bede Griffiths notes, "The 'merciful' is thus conceived as the womb from which all the potentialities in the divine mind are released in creation."¹⁰ We all begin, as Jesus began, in the womb of compassion, God's divine, life-giving compassion. Incarnation must, then, occur in a cave.

It mixes metaphors a bit, but perhaps you can think of reading this book as a sort of cave-in-time, a dark (since you don't know what you will encounter or what will happen), nurturing (since you do know you are perfectly safe with Jesus) "space" from which new life in you might emerge. This is why I have opened this book with the quotation from Meister Eckhart: "Tend only to the birth in you and you will find all goodness and all consolation, all delight, all being, and all truth. . . . What comes to you in this birth brings with it pure being and blessing." We are coming to birth and dying all the time. If we want to grow and flourish, we must devote our energy to what is being born in us and not to what is dying. It is when we cling to the dying that we get into spiritual trouble. To "choose life" is to be open to blessing.

And so we begin our journey through the spiritual landscape of Jesus at the beginning, with a cave, a womb, a birth, new life. The poem "The Kingdom" by R. S. Thomas serves as a wonderful invitation to this pilgrimage and reminds us to set aside our expectations and assumptions (and when we deal with gospel texts most of us have plenty of both) and to come with that most wonderful reality: our neediness. Only the empty cup can be filled. Only the open hands and heart are available to and for God.

The Kingdom

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.¹¹

Chapter One

The Wilderness and the Desert/ Chaos and Comfort¹²

Mark 1:1-14; 1:35-39; 6:31, 35



O God, like your chosen people of old, we begin our journey in the desert wilderness. When we are in light, lead us by a pillar of cloud. When we are in darkness, lead us by a pillar of fire. Feed us with manna and give us courage not to hoard it. Give us water from these very rocks, that we may be your living water for a desperately thirsty world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

“The Desert and the Dry Land”

The desert is a terrifically potent location and metaphor in Scripture. It is a place of terror and tenderness, a place where one is at the mercy of life's extremes and, therefore, completely dependent upon God, who provides what is needed in the desert. As the people of God, our story begins in a garden (Eden), winds its way through various deserts (Sinai, Rift Valley, “beyond the Jordan”), and ends in a city (Jerusalem, the “New Jerusalem”). But it is in the desert that we come to know God and to be constituted as God's people.

The Exodus sojourn of Israel is an exile, but it is also the time when God directly led, fed, and cared for Israel, paradigmatically

2 *The Spiritual Landscape of Mark*

forgave her sin (after that unfortunate incident with the golden calf), and gifted her with the Law. Christians often get this wrong. Torah is not a burden but God's great gift to Israel. It was in the geographic desert east of the Jordan, and in the desert created by a drought from God, that Elijah was fed by ravens (1 Kgs 17), and it was in the desert where he had fled from Jezebel that an angel brought him food and water and where he met God in what the NRSV calls the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19).

For Israel's prophets the desert was a powerful symbol. For Hosea, the desert was a trysting place, a place where the love-pact between God and God's beloved people was to be renewed. According to Hosea, God woos Israel:

I will now allure her [that is, Israel]
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.
From there I will give her her vineyards
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
(Hos 2:14-15)

The idea that God would woo sinful humanity is surprising enough, but this last statement is astonishing because the Valley of Achor (the Hebrew *ay'kor* means "trouble") at the northwest end of the Dead Sea, the desert that formed the northern border of Judah, is where Achan was executed after his disobedience at the time of Joshua (Josh 7:20-26). God is going to make the desert, the place Israel thought of as "trouble," the place of execution, the way to hope! Second Isaiah uses the same striking image when he says that the Valley of Achor will be "a place for herds to lie down" (Isa 65:10).

Indeed, in the book of Isaiah, God's power was manifested in God's ability to transform the desert.¹³ Here are a few examples:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isa 35:1-2)

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. (Isa 43:19)

For the LORD will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isa 51:3)

In *The Wilderness of God* Andrew Louth has written that the desert, so barren for human purposes, is open to divine purposes.¹⁴ In the desert, where human life is moment by moment at the mercy of the elements, it is God who gives water from the rock and the mysterious, miraculous meal of manna. What I am suggesting by reminding you of these biblical references to the desert is that it is an ambiguous image in Scripture. The desert is the place of danger and abandonment, but it is precisely *in* the desert that God intervenes to save. And this is very good news indeed, particularly if one's immediate future includes a desert, or if one is presently in an arid and empty place.

The Desert Spirituality of St. Mark

No gospel writer understood desert theology better than St. Mark, writer of the first gospel, indeed perhaps “inventor” of this literary form. Mark was probably an urban Christian and certainly had a strong interest in the desert. As noted in the introduction, I think Mark wrote his gospel for Christians in Rome around the time of Nero's persecutions. The traditional dating of the gospel is AD 65–70, making it a gospel written about the dreadful time of the fall of Jerusalem. Mark's original audience may have witnessed the triumphal procession of Titus through Rome in AD 71, when the holy furnishings from the Jerusalem temple were carried through the streets for the rabble's amusement.

One of the reasons Mark wrote was in response to the obliteration of the Mother Church in Jerusalem and the resultant need to preserve the Jesus traditions.¹⁵ Mark wrote in a time of destruction, disintegration, and persecution to a marginal group within a dominant, hostile culture.¹⁶ Mark wrote for a suffering community, a community whose very existence was in jeopardy, a community metaphorically, if not literally, in a desert. Mark has a remarkable number of references to the desert. I found in the gospel at least ten uses of *eremos*, the Greek word for “desert,” which is sometimes also translated into English as “wilderness.” Where these references occur may surprise you, as they surprised me and gave me new insight into Mark’s narrative. First, though, a little etymology.

The word *eremos* is found most frequently in the New Testament as an adjective to describe abandonment or as a noun to refer to a locality without inhabitants, an empty, abandoned, or thinly populated place.¹⁷ This is close to the Latin *desertus*: *de* meaning “from” plus *serere* meaning “to join.” A desert is an “unjoined” place. From the root notion of leaving community comes the idea of an uncultivated region without inhabitants, a wilderness. Etymologically a desert is more a wild, uninhabited place than an arid, barren one. The word is not a description of a weather pattern. Although it is “about” something else, R. S. Thomas’s poem “The Absence” helps us understand the word.

It is this great absence
 that is like a presence, that compels
 me to address it without hope
 of a reply. It is a room I enter
 from which someone has just
 gone. The vestibule for the arrival
 of one who has not yet come.
 I modernise the anachronism
 of my language, but he is no more here
 than before. Genes and molecules
 have no more power to call
 him up than the incense of the Hebrews

at their altars. My equations fail
as my words do. What resource have I
other than the emptiness without him of my whole
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?¹⁸

The Greek root *erem* means “lonely place” with both connotations of danger to body and soul (in traditional Jewish belief demons were fond of lonely places and ruins) but also of rest, of refuge for the persecuted. As we shall see, both Mark’s gospel and the life of Jesus open with these two aspects of the desert in evidence.

Mark 1:1-13

The story line of the gospel begins in the desert with John the Baptist. But even before the narrative begins, Mark introduces a programmatic quotation from the prophets that combines Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:5-6. “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you . . . the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’” (1:2). This is characteristic of the way Mark uses Hebrew Scripture; he combines quotations in such a way that a new assertion is made.¹⁹ Please note that according to this blended quotation it is *in* the wilderness that the Lord’s way is prepared. This is true to Isaiah’s vision in 40:3: “*In the wilderness* prepare the way of the LORD, make straight *in the desert* a highway for our God” (italics mine). God does not remove the desert, because God has work to be done precisely there. Mark tells the reader at the very beginning that his is a story about a messenger *in* the wilderness, about preparations to be made precisely there. Mark’s is a story that unfolds in the context of desert or wilderness.

And so the narrative begins with a messenger in the wilderness, a case in point of the general statement just made. “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). John appears in the wilderness, the symbol of the time when God was preparing the people for entry into the Promised Land. The wilderness is where people meet God. The Markan John the Baptist material makes the connection

between Israel's past and the Jesus story. It is in the desert that God's people find God or, more precisely, are found by God; in the desert they repent; in the desert they find forgiveness; in the desert they rediscover their original inheritance as God's children.

In Mark's narrative people from Jerusalem, the locus of the temple, the dwelling place of God, flock out to the desert to hear John. This gives me pause. What were those people seeking? What was lacking? What did the center of religious life and worship not provide? Why were they choosing the call of the desert over institutional or organized religion? These, it seems to me, are very timely questions.

All the events related in the christological prologue of 1:1-13 occur in the wilderness and are linked by reference to the Holy Spirit. The wilderness may be the abode of demons, but the Spirit of God abides there as well. The desert is the place of repentance and restoration of relationship, but it is also the place of temptation. We read that after Jesus' baptism: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (1:12-13). Mark probably expects that some of his readers/hearers will remember the forty years that the Hebrew people were tested in the Sinai desert, Moses' forty days on the mountain, Elijah's trip to Mount Horeb. Interestingly, all these images reappear in chapter 9 in the transfiguration account, which balances the trials of the earthly Jesus with a glimpse of the eternal Christ. We will attend to this material in chapter four of this book.

But something else is going on here. Although Satan is in evidence, the "wild beasts" do not harm Jesus. The curse of Genesis 3 is lifted in the image of harmony between man and beast.²⁰ The angels wait on (or serve, minister to) Jesus. Here is an image of harmony between human being and heavenly being (in fact, a reversal of the usual roles). The desert may be a time of testing and temptation (more fully treated by St. Matthew and St. Luke), but it is also, on a cosmic scale, potentially a time of restoration of relationship, of receiving the consolations of heaven. The first Sunday of Lent we usually hear the text preached in a way that stresses Jesus sharing

temptations with us. Perhaps we also need to hear that the desert time is a time of reunion, of consolation, a time when heaven comes down to comfort earth.

Mark 1:1-13 provides all the information necessary to understand Jesus. It sets forth his titles (v. 1), links him to Israel's story (vv. 2-8), reintroduces his titles (vv. 9-11), and demonstrates their reality (vv. 12-13). Mark opens with the paradox of Jesus' identity: He is the "more powerful" one who is to come, but he is also the one driven into the wilderness and tempted. After a summary of Jesus' preaching in 1:14-16, in 1:16-29 Mark carefully sets out a "typical day" in Jesus' ministry. The Lord calls disciples (vv. 16-20), teaches and preaches (vv. 21-22, 38-39), exorcizes demons (whom he has already met and mastered in the wilderness temptation, vv. 23-26, 32-34), heals (vv. 29-31, 32, 34), and withdraws for prayer (v. 35). This last activity picks up again the "desert" theme.

Mark 1:35-39

After a day of frenetic activity, "while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place [*eremon topon*, or lonely place], and there he prayed" (1:35). Jesus *chooses* the desert, goes out to a lonely, deserted place to pray. For Jesus, a place without inhabitants is a place where nothing separates him from God; "what He primarily seeks there . . . is the stillness of prayer."²¹ John Greenleaf Whittier's nineteenth-century hymn "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" gets it right: Jesus seeks "the silence of eternity / interpreted by love."

For all the things that matter, Jesus is our example. Here he demonstrates that, as Peter France put it in writing about the Desert Christians of the fourth century, to be silent and alone is to open one's self to influences crowded out of an occupied life.²² Throughout the Bible, the desert is the place where people meet God, because there is nothing much there to distract them *from* God. Sometimes, as in the life of Jesus, one is driven there (1:12), and sometimes, also as in the life of Jesus, one flees there for refuge (1:35); one chooses desert, seeks it out.

In Mark 1:35-39 the fact that Jesus had to be “hunted” (v. 36) and “found” (v. 37) implies that he had gone to a fairly remote place. Jesus really wanted “desert time,” time to seek God in prayer. Christologically, this points to the fact that Jesus’ authority and power came from this dependence upon God. But the disciples, those closest to Jesus, don’t understand it as, indeed, they misunderstand so much in Mark’s narrative. Mark says they “hunted for him” (v. 36). The verbs Mark uses, *katediochen* in verse 36 and *zetousin* in verse 37, are the same he uses for those who later in the narrative seek Jesus to distract him from his true mission (3:32; 8:11) or “hunt for him” or “seek him out” to kill him (11:18; 12:12; 14:1,11, 55).

This image of Jesus choosing the desert, fleeing to a wilderness place, leads me to two kinds of reflection. If the Lord himself needed times of withdrawal, time to be alone to pray, how much more necessary it is for me. Pascal remarked that “all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber.”²³ In this context perhaps we might say the *soul* cause of human unhappiness is that we do not know when or how to seek the desert of solitude, silence, and prayer. Jesus went out at night to pray because night is the daily “desert time.”²⁴ We need nights in the desert, nights when, in the words of St. John of the Cross, “*noche que juntaste/Amado con Amada/Amada en el Amado transformada*,” nights “when the lover meets the Beloved and is transformed.”

Second, I wonder how often I have been like the disciples in this passage. How often have I tried to distract others from the deep need of the human heart for solitude and prayer? Describing Jesus’ desert experience in Mark 1:12, Gerhard Kittel noted that it was a period alone with God under the impulsion of the *penuma* (Spirit) “which the tempter tries to disturb.”²⁵ Like Simon Peter did to Jesus, whom have I tried to roust from a *chosen* wilderness in order to get him or her to do something “useful”? For if you go to the desert, you may be sure someone will tell you that you are being useless. Distracting others from their chosen deserts is the devil’s work.

After a period of intense activity, Jesus chooses to withdraw for prayer (1:35). After the controversies recorded in 2:15–3:6, “Jesus withdrew with his disciples” (3:7). The word for “withdrew,” *anach-*

oreo, is a fascinating one. Its lectionary definition is “to withdraw,” “to go away,” and also “to return.” It is a compound word made up of *ana*, “each” or “each one,” and *choreo*, “to make room for.” Paradoxically, to withdraw is to make room for; to seek the desert is to prepare to be more fully present. Remarking on Mark 3:7, Mary Ann Tolbert says that although Jesus withdraws after the controversies of 2:15–3:6, the presence of the world continues with Jesus, because he is carrying the world with him in his withdrawal.²⁶ Mark’s gospel depicts Jesus as attempting three periods of private prayer: at the beginning of the Galilean ministry (1:35), in its midst (6:45-46) and at the close of his life when he withdraws to Gethsemane (14:32ff). In each instance, people interrupt him.

When I thought about Mark’s gospel in terms of the desert, John the Baptist and the temptation in the wilderness came immediately to mind. I was not surprised to find the word “desert” or “lonely place” appeared in connection with John the Baptist’s radical preaching or Jesus’ own need for prayer. What I had entirely overlooked was the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 6 and of the four thousand in chapter 8; both occur in the desert. In Mark’s gospel, the desert is the place of preparation (1:3), of challenge (1:4), of temptation (1:12), of prayer and rest (1:35), but also of feeding, of being given divine sustenance. Anyone who has read Exodus remembers that the desert is the place where miraculously, but very directly, God feeds God’s people. How could I have missed the fact that three times in the story of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-44, Mark mentions the desert, the lonely or the deserted place, the wilderness?

Mark 6:30-44

A great deal happens in Mark 6. Jesus is rejected after teaching in the synagogue in “his hometown” (6:1, 3). Jesus sends the Twelve out on mission (6:7-13), and the skillful narrator, Mark, uses that as an opportunity to tell the story of the Baptist’s martyrdom (6:14-29). The disciples return from their mission and report to Jesus who immediately (Mark’s favorite word) says, “Come away to a *deserted place* [*eremon topon*, italics mine] all by yourselves, and rest a while”

(6:31). And so they “went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves” (6:32). Thus the feeding of the five thousand opens with two of three uses in the passage of *eremos*, desert, lonely place. It is in the course of trying to get away for rest and prayer that Jesus and the disciples are accosted by “a great crowd,” upon whom Jesus has compassion and manifests it by teaching them (6:34). In Mark’s gospel, Jesus frequently withdraws *from* the crowd to be *with* the disciples or alone for prayer.²⁷ But as so often happens with teachers, time gets away from Jesus, and it is the disciples who remind him, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late” (6:35).

Jesus makes it clear that it is the disciples’ responsibility to feed the crowd. It is worth noting that Mark uses the word “crowd” thirty-eight times. For him it means the poor, those living at subsistence level, that 90 percent of the population who lived in villages and rural areas and paid two-thirds of their crops in rent.²⁸ When the five little loaves and two fish they have are put in the hands of Jesus, he “looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people,” and “all ate and were filled” (6:41-42).

Mark relates the story so that we know this is no ordinary picnic. Jesus “ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass” (6:39), the position for dining at a banquet. The great crowd “sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties” (6:40); the image is that of the order of the Mosaic camp in the Sinai wilderness (Exod 18:21). Jesus’ handling of the provisions echoes the essential Eucharistic words and actions earlier recorded by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. This is a desert feeding designed to recall both God’s provision for Israel in the Sinai desert and the Lord Jesus’ provision for his people in the wilderness of the world in which they will find themselves. Here, in the desert, is manna, Host, Eucharist. “For Mark, Jesus is a living symbol of plenty, just as the Kingdom of God itself is the advent of the abundant harvest” (4:8, 20).²⁹

I tend to think of this as the “miracle of the leftovers” (which are never treated with the respect due miracles in my household!). The community finishes with more than it had in the beginning. But this is also a story about feeding and being fed *in* the desert. In the desert of Sinai Israel had to depend upon God to feed them,

because there was no one else to depend upon. Likewise, here in this “deserted place” only God can provide enough. And more than enough. In the feeding of the four thousand in 8:1-10, as well, the setting is the desert. Jesus’ disciples (whose memory and intelligence are about equally poor) again ask: “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” (8:4). In both desert feeding stories Jesus is “the embodiment of abundance in the midst of scarcity.”³⁰ It is only the empty-handed who approach God expecting to be filled.³¹ Jesus provides abundance *in the desert*. For those on the margins, and those in the wilderness, this is good news indeed!

But notice that Jesus intends to feed the multitude by means of the disciples. “*You* give them something to eat,” Jesus says in 6:37 (italics mine). As Elizabeth Struthers Malbon points out in her work on Mark: “The people of the crowd are the chief beneficiaries, the disciples, the chief assistants, of Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing.”³² If what we as his disciples are to provide is not to be the spiritual equivalent of “junk food,” then we must deepen our own resources for feeding by precisely the sort of withdrawal, the going away to a deserted place, with which the story opens, which Jesus himself sought. We are not only the ones invited by Jesus to rest in the wilderness; we are those commanded by him to feed others there. Like these first disciples, we may find ourselves “taken, blest, broken and given” to feed (1 Cor 11:23-25; Mark 6:41). Often we are called to meet serious human need at just the point we find ourselves most depleted. Precisely then we become the body of Christ as, in our brokenness, we are blessed and given for others.

Here again in chapter 6 the desert is the place of danger and need as it was for Jesus at his temptation. It is also the locus of rest and prayer as it was for Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, and it becomes the place where people are taught, where they find that Jesus has compassion on them, where the disciples are challenged to action (as John the Baptist challenged his hearers to action in the Jordan wilderness), and where everybody is abundantly fed. The wilderness may be the place of abandonment, but it is also a refuge for the persecuted and a place of salvation, an arid place that, by the mysterious grace of God, blossoms abundantly.

For the LORD will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isa 51:3)

Conclusion

The image of the desert is a particularly apt one as we begin our journey through the landscape of Jesus' life. It includes both danger and promise. The desert before us today includes the threat of terrorism and the resultant suspicion of our neighbors, the terrible temptation to demonize difference. It includes a repugnant war in which the mightiest nations on earth bomb others without redress. It includes genocide and widespread starvation and death from preventable diseases. Closer to home, for many it includes the perennial sufferings of disease and depression.

But Mark's desert is an ambiguous metaphor. Like life itself, it embraces the negative and the positive, the terrible and the wonderful. The challenge of desert spirituality in Mark is the challenge to find the first tentative buds that promise blossoms to come, to find the "hope that sends a shining ray" in darkness and aridity, to find God in the desert, to accept the "peace that only [God] can give"³³ *there*—because everywhere else our hands are so full trying to do it all for ourselves. It is a great and terrifying truth that God can only fill the hands of those who approach God empty-handed. Jesus says "Blessed are the poor" for a reason, and it isn't economic.

Writing of the desert, Alessandro Pronzato explains:

The desert is the threshold to the meeting ground of God and [humans]. It is the scene of the exodus. You do not settle there, you pass through. One then ventures on to these tracks because one is driven by the Spirit towards the Promised Land. But it is only promised to those who are able to chew sand for forty years without doubting their invitation to the feast in the end.³⁴

In the Bible, the first lesson of the desert is the relinquishment of human control and dependence upon God alone, relinquishment of human concern so that God alone can be the focus of our attention.³⁵ When God comes clearly into focus on the horizon of life, a very curious thing happens; we discover that the face of God is imprinted on the faces of the neediest of those among us. The moment in which the mouth full of sand becomes the mouth full of manna is the moment when my neighbor's hunger becomes as important as my own.

Mark's picture of Jesus feeding the multitudes in the desert is certainly the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that the desert shall blossom. But Jesus feeds by means of the disgruntled disciples. Mark's disciples, as indeed we, ourselves, have some things to learn about need. It is my suspicion that we are driven by the Spirit into the wilderness precisely to learn about need, to find that, in many ways and on many levels, we, too, are needy. We must learn this lesson in what W. B. Yeats called "the deep heart's core" because it is only through the open door of the solidarity of human need that the power of God can enter the world to feed, to make the desert blossom. We can never open that door through our own ingenuity.

So the desert is the place of promise for the one brave enough to go there, to remain there long enough to learn the bitter and liberating lesson of her or his own need. In the introduction to his collection for Lent entitled *The Desert* John Moses writes:

The desert is a place of truth. The experiences of the desert expose our weaknesses, search us out, test us. The desert can . . . be the place of discovery. . . . the meeting ground of God with all who learn to rest in faith alone. The promise remains that the desert shall rejoice and blossom, that waters shall break forth in the wilderness, that the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. [The desert] speaks of the hidden life, of endurance, of testing, of simplicity, of self-abandonment, of the silent prayer of the spirit. It bears witness to the absolute priority of God.³⁶

We could appropriately close on this high note of theological rectitude. But ending with a story is more in the desert tradition. Accounts of the Desert Christians of the fourth century report that people went out into the desert to seek the men and women who had made eating sand their regular diet. They asked them for a word, a bit of manna to sustain their own journeys. And I have one for you. It comes from that wise “children’s book” by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*. You probably remember the story. The airman has an accident and comes down in the Sahara Desert, where he meets what he first describes as “an odd little voice,” whom we come to know as the little prince. In chapter 24, eight days after his crash in the desert, the airman has drunk his last drop of water. He and the little prince trudge along for several hours in search of water. They find none. Night falls. A conversation about the beauty of the desert ensues. It closes: “What makes the desert beautiful,” said the little prince, “is that somewhere it hides a well. . . .”³⁷

This is my word for you: What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well. May you find it, drink deeply, and bring others to share the gift of its living water. For this is the desert pattern of Jesus’ own life, and, as Mark teaches us, disciples are to do as their master does.