is the same expression he uses when Jesus drives out demons. There is an element of coercion when the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit is forceful, and Jesus is compelled to go into the wilderness, almost as if he could not resist the Spirit. We may wonder if Jesus felt pushed there against his will. Whatever the motivation, Jesus goes into the wilderness, driven there by the Spirit.

By this phrase, Mark underscores the power God’s Spirit. The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at baptism, affirming his identity, now drives him into the wilderness. Mark also emphasizes Jesus’ humility and his submission to God’s will. Here we see Jesus’ willingness to grapple with his identity and embrace his mission. Jesus made himself wholly available to God’s Spirit and he went where the Spirit drove him.

Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness is variously referred to as the “temptations” of Jesus and the “testing” of Jesus. “Testing” is more closely aligned with the original Greek. I do not believe that God knowingly or wantonly leads us into temptation. A good and gracious God would not lead us into harmful activities or destructive habits. I do believe that God leads us into times of testing to prepare us for what is to come. God doesn’t tempt, but God does test.

Every teacher we ever had at school tested us. Most of us had a mix of two types of teachers: those who tested us to reinforce what we knew, and those who tested us to prove what we did not know. Both are valuable life lessons.

When I was in seminary, I participated in two church internships. My first internship was overseas, in Scotland, with a yoked parish: a mid-sized, city church and a small, country church. My second internship was at a large, 2,000-member, suburban church near Philadelphia. These internships provided day-to-day experiences in the life of a congregation. These internships tested my mind and my heart, and prepared me to be a local church pastor, work for which I believe I am well-suited.

I also completed two units of Clinical Pastoral Education, meaning I was a hospital chaplain for a year. This was work with which I had no previous experience, and work for which I was completely unprepared. I don’t like hospitals. I don’t like blood or broken bodies. I don’t like messes, but here I was stepping into people’s lives at their messiest moments to offer God’s love and support at their most vulnerable times. I became a parish pastor because I am well-suited to that kind of work; I did not become a hospital chaplain because I am not well-suited to that kind of work. Sometimes testing helps us discern what we should NOT do.

This is what is happening to Jesus: he is being tested, forged in the wilderness, trained for the ministry he is about to begin. Jesus is being personally prepared for all that he must endure in the coming days and years, up to the point of his death on the cross.

As disciples of Jesus, we must allow the Spirit we received at our baptism to “drive us” forward, giving the Spirit free reign in our lives. The Spirit calls for our humility and our total submission to God’s will. The Spirit compels us to relinquish any control we think we have and to rely totally on God, like Jesus did in the desert. Allowing the Spirit to drive us forward is an act of great faith because we do not know where God’s Spirit will drive us or what God’s Spirit will ask of us. The Spirit is very likely to drive us to uncomfortable places, ask us to confront difficult circumstances, and invite us to love people who challenge us. But when we give the Spirit the freedom to reign in us and to drive us where the Spirit wills, life takes on a totally new meaning.

We are entering the forty days of the Lenten season, our own forty days in the wilderness. Lent is a good time to focus on our identity and mission. As Mark reveals Jesus’ identity as the “Beloved Son,” may we deepen our identity as beloved God’s sons and daughters. May we become more conscious of the dignity of one another as God’s children. May we choose to live more intentionally as the family of God.

When we become conscious of our identity as God’s beloved sons and daughters it begins to affect our daily living: it propels us into mission. Our identity and our mission become the embodiment of Jesus to the world. To be Christ-like, loving and caring as he did, is our identity. To live like Jesus did; generously, selflessly, compassionately, is our mission. We must, each day, find meaning in our identity as God’s sons and daughters, and embrace the mission that emerges from our identity.

Friends, we may find ourselves in the desert this Lent, but we are not there alone. The Spirit of God that drove us into the wilderness is with us, driving us onward. The most meaningful thing we can do is to embrace the emerging kingdom of God, to “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). This Lent, affirm and embrace: affirm your identity as a child of God, a disciple of Jesus, a Spirit-driven servant, and embrace your mission promoting life in the kingdom of God.

Prayer: Testing God, we thank You that it is possible now for us to have our hearts melted by the knowledge of Your love for us, to have our hearts maintained and changed by the remembrance of Your grace for us, and, most of all, to be completely changed by the knowledge of what Your Son has not just done for us, but what Your Son *is* for us. Amen. (Tim Keller)

**Source**: Adapted from Fr. Satish Joseph. “Wilderness, Identity & Mission.” February 21, 2021. <https://wherepeteris.com/driven-into-the-wilderness-with-christ/>

**Wilderness, Identity & Mission**

Wednesday Lenten Service #1, March 12, 2025 Mark 1:9-15

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

This year, during our Wednesday Lenten services, we are focusing on the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us about Jesus’ time in the wilderness; but there is a big difference between Mark’s account of Jesus in the desert, and that of Matthew and Luke. While Matthew and Luke describe Jesus’ forty days in the desert in considerable detail, Mark completely skips over it altogether. Marks only tells us what happened *before* Jesus went into the desert and *after* Jesus emerged from the desert.

Before Jesus entered the desert, he was baptized by John in the river Jordan. As Jesus rose from the water, a voice from heaven says that Jesus is “[God’s] beloved Son” (Mark 1:9-11). Here, before the wilderness experience, Jesus’ identity is affirmed. After the temptation, emerging from the desert, Jesus begins his public ministry with these words: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1: 14-15). Here, after the wilderness experience, Jesus’ mission is revealed.

The desert becomes the link between Jesus’ identity and his mission. Jesus is declared the Son of God before he enters the desert and emerging from the desert he inaugurates the Kingdom of God. For Mark, then, it is not the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness that are the focal point. Mark’s focus is on Jesus’ identity, and on the mission that flows from his identity.

Mathew and Luke tell us that it was the Holy Spirit of God that “led” Jesus into the wilderness. Mark expresses it a little differently. Mark says that the Spirit *drove* Jesus out into the desert (Mark 1:12). Mark’s choice of “drove” is interesting because it