

LENT 1B – February 18, 2018
Thrown To The Wolves
(Mark 1:9-15)

Our first football scrimmage, during my sophomore year of high school was in Plainfield, New Jersey against Plainfield High. At the time, I was only 15 years old, my present height (6'2"), and I might have tipped the scales at a whopping 155 pounds; soaking wet, that is. (What I wouldn't give to be that weight again *today*, however! But back *then*, during my football-playing days, it was definitely a liability.)

And I'll never forget that scrimmage because it was the very first time that my good friend Dave Costeira and I ever started for the varsity. We were both offensive tackles that year.

But it wasn't because we had earned it or deserved it, mind you! No, it was simply because all the upperclassman, including the *true* starters, had been "dogging" it in practice all week long, thereby incurring the wrath of the coaching staff. And so, as punishment, and to make the two starting tackles (quote unquote) "an example" for the rest of the team, the coaches had decided that, instead, these two "lowly" sophomores would start in their place that day. The purpose of the punishment, apparently, was to somehow embarrass and shame them.

But, in retrospect, I'm not so sure that it even *was* punishment – for *them*, that is! You see, Plainfield High School was a tough, inner-city school, and had one of the better football programs in the state back then. Moreover, their players were much larger, stronger, and faster than we were. In fact, I'm not so sure now that the starters hadn't actually "dogged" it in practice back then *on purpose*, just so they wouldn't have to face Plainfield's first-team defensive line!

Dave and I, however, were too young, naïve, and excited to think about any of this at the time. Until, that is, we lined up against our opponents for the very first play from scrimmage. Because both of the guys across the line from us were *huge*, 6'5" or better and about 250 pounds apiece – or a *hundred pounds* more than I weighed at the time! I mean, these guys had muscles *on top* of their muscles! And, remember, this was in the days *before* steroids.

Moreover they were mean-looking. Not only that, but they looked like full-grown men, compared to the little boys we still resembled. At the time, I was shaving maybe once a week, whereas these guys looked like they had to shave *twice a day*! And I *knew* that I was in trouble when, just before the referee's whistle, a little toddler, standing on the sidelines with her mother, waved at the player across from me, and said, "Hi Daddy!"

Needless to say, it did not go well... On the very first play, as I fired out of my stance to block this "*Goliath*" across from me, he just stuck out a huge hand and "palmed" my helmet, and held me there. It was like running into a tree. I sort of felt like Jerry Lewis in one of his early movies: a weak, skinny, uncoordinated kid huffing and puffing, my feet churning beneath me tearing up the sod, but getting absolutely nowhere. He just held me away, with one powerful hand on my helmet, until he saw where the play was going, whereupon he picked me up under the shoulder pads and tossed me off the field. That's right, he didn't just knock me out of the way; he literally *threw* me to the sidelines!

When I came to – now looking through the ear-hole of my helmet – I first took a moment to make sure that I was still in one piece, and that everything was still in working order. And then, twisting my helmet back into position, I trotted back onto the field for more punishment – which is really what it was...

Mercifully, the coaches took both Dave and me out after the first couple of series. Long enough, they reasoned, to “*teach*” the starters a lesson. Some lesson! I’m still convinced to this day that those starting tackles just sat back and watched us get slaughtered out there, relieved that it wasn’t them!

Looking back on the experience, all these many years later, phrases like “baptism by fire” and “sink or swim” quickly come to mind. For it truly *was* one of those moments when I was forced to do something for the first time the “hard way”; and was also put in a situation where I was either going to fail, or find a way to succeed. Unfortunately, both Dave and I “*sank*” that day (straight to the bottom, I might add), although I’m proud to say that we both eventually learned how to “swim” successfully in the waters of high school varsity football in the years to come.

But, perhaps, the *best* description of that experience is that we were “thrown to the wolves,” literally as well as figuratively. In fact, come to think of it, those Plainfield guys were big enough and mean enough to chase *away* a pack of ravenous wolves.

Again, the coaches threw us to the proverbial wolves that day; ostensibly to make a point to the rest of our teammates and to teach some of them a lesson. But all *I* know is that we were like sacrificial lambs out there.

And in *many* ways... it was not all that different – though clearly on a much smaller scale – than what Jesus faced in today’s Gospel...

Of all the gospels, Mark is the shortest and the most succinct. The “Cliff Notes” version, if you will. No wasted words or long descriptions for Mark. No sir. Rather, straight to the point, and “Just the facts, ma’am” as Sgt. Joe Friday used to say on TV’s *Dagnet*.

After all, in just seven short verses, Mark tells us here that Jesus was baptized, and was given confirmation of his true identity, he was then propelled into the wilderness and tempted for 40 days; after which he embarked on his public ministry, preaching, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”

Talk about a lot going on! You could write a whole chapter on *each* of those events. But Mark chooses the “streamlined” approach. It’s like that old saying, “You can’t see the forest for the trees.” In other words, you can get so bogged down in detail that you lose a sense of the big picture. Well, Mark, obviously, is only concerned about the forest here; he leaves the in-depth description of the trees for the *other* gospel writers.

And by doing so, quite intentionally I’m convinced, Mark makes sure that we understand right “up front” who Jesus is, and what he is all about, and what he has come to accomplish. No fooling around here. No detail-rich, well drawn-out stories, such as we find in Matthew and Luke, or even poetic theology such as occurs in the Gospel of John. Just the facts, the plain facts, and nothing *but* the facts.

And Mark accomplishes this by getting straight to the point, and *also* by using language that is simple and somewhat abrupt even. For instance, in both Matthew and Luke, when Jesus is baptized, they tell us that the heavens were “opened” and the Holy Spirit descended. But in Mark (as I noted last month), the heavens were literally “*torn apart*”; that is ripped open, split in an almost violent way.

Thomas Long, who teaches preaching at the Candler School of Theology down in Atlanta, tells the story of a biblical scholar who was once describing this scene to a group of teenagers. After telling them how the original Greek describes this opening of the

heavens in such a dramatic and forceful way, he said, “When Jesus was baptized, the heavens that separate us from God were ripped open so that now we can get to God. Because of Jesus we have access to God – we can get close to him.”

But there was one young man sitting in the front row who said, “That ain’t what it means.” The Bible scholar was startled, and said, “What?” And the young man replied, “I said that ain’t what it means. It means that the heavens were ripped open so that now *God* can get at *us*... anytime he wants.”

Think about it... In Mark, there *are* no birth narratives as in Matthew and Luke; no heartwarming and memorable stories of first-time parents, humble mangers, and mangy shepherds, and mysterious wise men. Nor is there anything like the prologue in John’s gospel which describes the “Word” that became flesh and lived among us.

No, in keeping with his short and streamlined style, Jesus simply appears on the scene in Mark as a full-grown man, gets baptized by John in the Jordan, and then *bam*: the heavens are ripped open, and the dove descends, and the voice from heaven tells us that this is *indeed* God’s Son, the beloved.

In other words, the heavens were torn apart, ripped open, and God’s voice (I can’t help but think of Charlton Heston here) announces that, through his Son, God is now “on the ground” so to speak, and ready to act. And that teenager had it right. When God is on the scene – watch out!

In the same way, after his baptism, Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was then simply “led” by the Spirit into the wilderness. Like it was nothing more than an invitation to afternoon tea. But, again, not Mark. No, in Mark, the Spirit “*drove*” him out into the wilderness.

In the Greek, this word carries with it a notion of violence, of being forcibly “cast out.” Much more abrupt, wouldn’t you say?

It’s like God was saying in Jesus’ baptism: “Okay, Son, you’re on the ‘first team’ here, you’re the ‘starter’ now.” And with that, we see that Jesus is about to experience a so-called “baptism by fire,” that Jesus is thrown into the game to either “sink or swim,” that, in many ways, God was even “throwing him to the wolves” here. After all, what does Jesus *encounter* out there in the wilderness? Oh, just the temptations of Satan in the midst of wild beasts!

Now scholars sometimes differ on how they interpret verse 13, but the sense that *I* get is that there is a “contest” going on here; between Jesus and Satan and, simultaneously, between the wild beasts who threaten Jesus, on the one hand; and the angels who minister to him, on the other. Again, a short, vivid, powerful, no-nonsense image here.

One of my daughter Sarah’s favorite books is *Into the Wild*, which, in turn, was made into a film by Sean Penn and even earned two Academy Award nominations. It tells the story of Chris McCandless who walked into the wilderness near Alaska’s Denali National Park to live off the land for a few months.”

“McCandless,” writes Sharron Lucas, “was no naïve, impetuous weirdo... He graduated with honors from Emory University, gave his law school savings of \$24,000 (away) to charity... and began what would be both an interior and exterior journey into uncharted territory.” Unfortunately, however, he would not return; his journey ended in death. But he left behind a journal which author Jon Krakauer would then use as the springboard to write his book.

What *Into the Wild* reminds us, of course, is that the wilderness is a dangerous place; even for highly educated, highly competent

people like Chris McCandless. And, *therefore*, it was dangerous for Jesus as well. Make no mistake about it. All you have to do is “read between the lines” to understand that Jesus was in real danger here, and that those temptations challenged him to the very core of his being.

David McKenna writes, “One of the aboriginal tribes of the South Seas has a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood called a ‘walkabout.’ A boy, coming to puberty, is sent into the jungle for six weeks (also 40 days, right?) without food, shelter, or weapons. During this time, he must test all of the survival skills he has learned during childhood. He must also be creative when he meets the unexpected... One mistake and he is dead. If, however, he survives to walk out of the jungle, he returns to a celebration that honors him as a man, a hunter, a warrior.”

In this morning’s gospel, Jesus does much the same thing, doesn’t he? Walks into the wilderness to test his survival skills and to *be tested* by Satan. As the Letter to the Hebrews once put it, “It was fitting that God... in bringing many people to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.” (Hebrews 2:10) And again, “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” (Hebrews 2:18) And finally, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

You see, the temptations that Jesus faced weren’t designed to see if he *would* sin, but to *prove* that he couldn’t. In other words, after the temptation in the wilderness, after Jesus came through with flying colors and without sin; we could now trust him, says Mark, and *moreover* trust the message that he then began to proclaim, namely: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”

Years ago, when I was that skinny high school sophomore, my friend Dave Costeira and I experienced a “baptism by fire” during that football scrimmage against Plainfield. Our coaches threw us into the game, partly to punish the real starters, and partly, I’m sure, to “test” *us* as well – in other words it was “sink or swim” time. And because of the level of competition we were facing that day, it was also probably true that we were being “thrown to the wolves,” so to speak; that is, put in a dangerous situation – completely on our own and without help,

Well, it occurs to me that the very same could be said of Jesus as well. Only for Jesus, the stakes were higher – *much* higher. Fresh from being acknowledged as God’s Son in the Jordan River (kind of like being named the “starter” in the biggest game of all), Jesus endures his *own* “baptism by fire,” by being driven out into the wilderness where he will *also* either “sink or swim,” and he is also literally “thrown to the wolves” when he is confronted there by wild beasts, not to mention the biggest, baddest wolf of them all – Satan himself.

But *unlike* my good buddy Dave Costeira and me, Jesus *passed his* test, he overcame all the challenges that were set before him, and he successfully resisted the temptations placed in his path. And it’s especially important for us to remember this as we head into Lent. Because we are *all* going to feel like my friend Dave and I felt in that scrimmage against the goliaths of Plainfield High School. We are all going to feel overmatched and overwhelmed, unprepared and unsuccessful. Time and time again, we are going to be tested. And time and time again, we are going to fail. So, if it was just up to us, we’d be in pretty big trouble.

But it *isn’t* just up to us. Why? Because Jesus went through everything we will *ever* face, endured everything we will ever struggle with, suffered everything that will ever afflict us. And

he emerged victorious. Especially on Easter morning. What's more, because he's already "been there" and "done that," he can now help us in our *own* time of need as well. "Turn this way," he says. "Follow me and believe in the good news."

Tony Campolo tells the story of Derek Redmond, who was an American 400-meter runner at the 1996 Summer Olympics. For years and years he had practiced and prepared for this race, with his father as his trainer and coach.

And during his heat, Redmond was well out in front of the pack when suddenly his Achilles tendon snapped. He stopped running but did not drop out of the race. In a struggling limp he pulled himself forward, dragging his injured leg behind him. The crowd stood and cheered the wounded runner on, but the pain was so great and the injury so serious that it was doubtful he could make it.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man jumped over the guardrail onto the track, caught up with Derek, put his arms around his waist, and helped him all the way to the finish line. It was his father!

When the race was over, Redmond said of his father, "He was the only one who could have helped me, because he was the only one who knew what I'd been through.

And so it is, says Campolo, that Jesus comes alongside each of us as well, to carry us the rest of the way. He is the only one who can, because he is the only one who understands what we've been through and what lies ahead.

Amen.