

# The First Sunday in Lent

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## Introduction

Friends, this is the reflection for the readings for the First Sunday of Lent, 2021. On Ash Wednesday we will send out the reflection for Ash Wednesday's readings, but if you wish to read that at this stage, you can find that reflection by clicking [here](#).

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In today's gospel — a text of just 130 words — we hear Mark's introduction of Jesus; we hear of his baptism by John in the Jordan, and the voice coming from heaven; the temptation in the wilderness; the arrest of John; and the beginning of Jesus' proclamation of good news. This is the breathtaking pace of the gospel of Mark.

And yet, in the midst of the frenetic pace of Mark's narration, there is a call to quietude. A voice of love and affirmation comes for Jesus, during a time when public attention towards figures of critique is high, and Jesus is *driven*. Not driven in reputation (although he's not frightened of reputation) but rather driven into a necessary wilderness, to take account of the words spoken to him, to face his own temptations, and to find comfort both in prayer and the earth

Even as you read this, listen to yourself as you take a breath. Time passes the way time passes. Some things feel frenetic. Even in pressured time, there is the possibility of listening to the sound of your breath in your body.

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## Text

Mark 1:9–15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn

apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And 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.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

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## Comment

We are back to the start of Mark’s gospel for this reading, the reading for the first Sunday of Lent. And we are with the only mention of the temptation in the desert that this Lent offers.

In Matthew and Luke’s gospels, Jesus of Nazareth’s engagement with the Satan in the wilderness is a significant narrative, complete with details of triple temptations and miistering angels. Here, however, it is covered in Mark’s characteristic breathtaking speed. The Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness where he remains for forty days, tempted by the Satan; keeping the company of wild beasts and angels. Boom.

This temptation is squeezed between Jesus’ baptism and John’s arrest. The baptism (accompanied by the heavenly voice of affirming love) is the narrative precursor to the wilderness time; and the arrest is the narrative precursor to Jesus’ public ministry.

The public affirmation of chosenness drove Jesus to solitude.  
The public demonstration of corruption drove Jesus to action.

In a way, it’s a lesson to live by: in a time when his *reputation* was being affirmed, Jesus needed time to ground himself. It was — in Mark’s schema anyway — the corruption and injustice of an innocent man being arrested (and later executed) that drove Jesus to speak in public. “Repent” he says, meaning “Change your mind, change your behaviour, change your direction.”

In these short verses we see Jesus of Nazareth as a character who takes reputation seriously. When he is being lauded, he enters secrecy; when people are being arrested, he raises his voice. This sets up a prototype for the rest of Mark’s gospel, really; namely that Jesus oscillates between intervention and discretion. *The Messianic Secret* it’s called — Jesus’ strange reluctance to speak about himself in Mark’s gospel. Devils and demons proclaim his identity as God’s chosen one, and he silences them. Even the Voice of God comes from the heavens, and Jesus goes to the desert. Theological and Christological tomes have been written, but sometimes I wonder if it would be better understood through the lens of psychology: Mark’s Jesus understood that his life flourished when public attention was matched by private intention.

In an era where many people seek fifteen minutes of fame, or where some people are famous for being famous, it is worthwhile considering the conflicted nature of Jesus’ relationship with reputation in this, the earliest of the gospels. Mark’s

depiction stands in stark contrast to the characterisation of Jesus in John's gospel where, through a succession of *I am* statements, Jesus names himself in increasingly audacious terms, culminating in his stating *I am the Life* at Lazarus' graveside — a statement that prompted his detractors to plot his execution. Here though, in this short and fast-paced gospel, we see a different depiction of Jesus.

There is much wisdom in the Markan depiction of Jesus' caution about reputation. He takes quietude in response to recognition. The recognition, in this case, comes from the Voice of God. So the recognition is not false. Jesus, however, takes time alone in response to it. What is this time alone for? To let the message sink deeper, it seems; but also to consider who he should be in light of these words. He has company in this wilderness: the company of temptation, the company of angels, and the company of wild beasts. In a way, this could be characterised as an inner voice, the experience of the earth, and the consolation of prayer.

*What's it like to be you?* a five year old asked me once. She was the daughter of my colleague. She thought deeply about matters and was asking everyone this question. It seems like she had recently come into a particular awareness of her own personhood — as well as the personhood of others — and she wanted to hear the answer to this most personal of questions. I think that Jesus of Nazareth was asking himself a similar question — *What's it like to be me?* — and he needed space for this complicated, conflicting, creative question.

Nobody can do this work for us. It is work we can only do for ourselves. Loving voices will speak loving things to us (we hope), but even those are not the final word. The invitation from this week's gospel text is to an inner life, an inner life that can listen to its own complexities and conflicts, shoring up wisdom, humility and determination, from which our small works of love and justice can emerge.

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## Response

One of the interesting features of this week's text is *and he was with the wild beasts*.

It's considered that perhaps this strange part of the story was written specifically for early Christians who were facing persecution, persecution in certain arenas with wild — and ferocious — animals, while crowds looked on and cheered. It is true that for small pockets of time, in a few particular locations, such persecution of Christians did occur in the first centuries of Christianity, although it was not nearly so widespread as some accounts would have us believe.

So this may explain the inclusion of the beasties, those other breathing beings.

Alongside that explanation, I'd like to also offer another one. In the wake of hearing that he had divine purpose, Jesus went to be with other animals. Animals know their own hungers, they forage, they find daily sustenance, they sleep where they sleep, and live with caution that predators may be around any corner. There is a wisdom that comes from watching the other animals with whom we share the planet.

So, as a response — consider animals. You may live with some. As I write this, it is snowing outside. In a few hours I will go and walk some paths to see the tracks of hares and foxes and deer and pleasant pheasants. There are documentaries to watch filled with insight. In this first Sunday of Lent, let us watch the other animals. What do we see? What do they see back?

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## Prayer

Jesus of the wilderness,  
in a time of heightened tensions  
you were driven to the wild:  
desolate lands with beasts  
temptations and dreams of angels.

In all the tensions of our day  
may we find small moments of reflection  
to guide us through this Lententide.

May the tracks of the hare remind us  
of the wisdom of the hare:  
be quick, watch out, don't forget to eat.

May our work for justice be nurtured  
by the focus found in wilderness.

We ask this because you asked this, you  
needed this; so do we.

Amen.

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## Further Reading

The Spirituality of Conflict project is shared across Irish and British individuals and organisations. The relationship between these islands is one that has thrived and improved in the last twenty years. In the first year of Brexit, and the year that marks the centenary of the partition of Ireland, the Corrymeela Community are releasing a podcast — The Corrymeela Podcast. You can subscribe by searching for *the Corrymeela Podcast* in whatever podcast app you use, or you can listen (with new episodes every Thursday) via [www.corrymeela.org/podcast](http://www.corrymeela.org/podcast)