That slyly clever observer of human nature, Oscar Wilde once said, “I can resist everything except... temptation,” Many of us can probably sympathize with his confession— I dare say, most of us can completely identify with it.

Yet another 19th Century author, Margaret Oliphant asserted that “Temptations come, as a general rule, when they are sought.”

We feel the truth of these two statements in our own experience and yet today’s gospel lesson belies the convictions of both. Jesus resists every temptation and he does not seek out temptation—he’s driven to it.

Emerging out of the Jordan, Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit of God descend upon him. He hears God's voice call him Son, the beloved with whom God is well pleased. God's Spirit settles fully upon him and immediately casts him out with divine force--impelling him into the wilderness. Jesus doesn't wander there to figure out who he is; he already knows that. Jesus doesn't withdraw to the wilderness for safety, for retreat, or even for contemplation, as he later will do on several occasions in his ministry. Jesus is driven there by a force he cannot resist, the Spirit of God which has just descended on him. Oh, the places the Spirit drives us to!

Each year, on the first Sunday in Lent, we begin with one of the three accounts of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. This year it is Mark’s version we hear. And Mark’s version—like everything else in this gospel—
is spare and right to the point.  
All Mark tells us is: 
*And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness.*  
*He was in the wilderness 40 days,*  
tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts  
*and angels waited on him.*

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray—  
“*lead us not into temptation*”  
he knew and prayed for something we often  
find uncomfortable or ignore—  
It’s important for me to repeat myself—  
*The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.*  
Jesus seems to know that God has a habit of doing that.  
God led the newborn nation of Israel  
out of Egypt into the wilderness.

God drew the prophet Elijah into the desert when he was running for his life.  
God drew Elijah through the desert to Mount Horeb  
where Elijah encountered God in the sound of silence.

It seems that the desert, the wilderness places,  
are God’s workshop.  
The desert, the wilderness is where God gets our attention.  
The desert, the wilderness reveals where our  
real allegiances are held.  
In the sounds of silence of deserted, wilderness places,  
is where we learn to distinguish between  
God and the seductive voice of Satan.  
The wilderness does that for us.

Last Sunday, I read a wonderful op-ed piece  
in the NY Times about the season of Lent  
by Verlyn Klinkenborg who wrote:  
*Some may think of Lent as a time  
to make up for the excesses of Mardi Gras.  
But Lent . . . isn’t a time of recovery.  
Lent, he reminded believers and non-believers alike,*  
*is a season based on wilderness—the one in which*  
*Jesus fasted for 40 days after his baptism.*  
Lent, is a season for learning the wisdom that  
*comes from the bare places, from deserts*  
*and dry mountains.*  
*Wisdom, he says, comes from the bare places because they force humility upon us.*  
*In these Lenten places where life thrives on almost nothing, we can see clearly how large*  
a shadow modern life and consumption cast upon the earth.
In secular terms, Lent seems the opposite of Christmas
‘What are you giving up’ versus
‘what are you getting?’
He concluded with a challenge or supposition:
Perhaps [Lent] might be a season in which to
learn the value of abstention and to consider
how to let the bare places flourish,
or even simply to exist.

Bare places can give us wisdom;
wilderness can do that for us.

The wilderness does not have to be the Sahara,
or even the barrens of the Jordan valley.
It can be the wilderness of a hospital room,
the barrenness of a dead-end job,
the wasteland of estrangement between family members, the overwhelming emptiness
which comes when you finally learn
that all you are doing is consuming.
It can be the desolation of taking stock
of your life at forty, fifty, or perhaps even sixty,
and realizing that nothing much has taken place,
the emptiness of awakening to the fact
that even in a crowd, you are alone.
These are just a few of the bare places,
the deserts or wildernesses out of which
we not only gain wisdom,
but out of which God delivers us from evil
and calls forth new life.

Mark’s beginning of the good news of Jesus
is dark, foreboding, ominous.
And that’s valuable for us to remember
on this First Sunday in Lent.
Not, of course,
to overdue the somber and penitential nature of Lent,
but rather because parts of our life
are dark, somber, ominous, and at times violent.
This passage -- and, indeed, all of Lent --
speak to an important
if at times difficult-to-name element of our life
in this world.
For we can too easily fall into thinking
that because Jesus is so good,
he’d really want nothing to do with us
-- the real "us"
that is, not the person we're trying to be, or hoping to be, or promising to be, or whatever.
But the real us—warts, failings, sin, brokenness, bare wilderness places and all.

How many of us have found ourselves wondering if God could really love us if God knew just how broken and at times how dark our lives can be?

This passage reminds us that Jesus came into darkness and violence precisely in order to be joined to our brokenness and to redeem it. But Jesus does not join our brokenness and redeem it with some kind of super-human willpower to resist temptation. No Jesus joins us in our brokenness, our weakness with a humanity fully open to the will of God. Jesus’ desert experience is the first and only time he will face temptation—Throughout all of his ministry, though the text does not name it specifically, Jesus took the wisdom and experience of trusting in God’s care in the barest of places all the way to the Garden and the Cross. Could it be that it was in the desert, Jesus first prayed—“your will, not mine, be done”? And just as important, in the desert—as Mark’s account tells us—Jesus was not alone. God’s presence, the breath of God’s word was present with him, sustaining him and lifting him up.

Lent reminds us that whenever we find ourselves in the wilderness of disease, loneliness, joblessness, depression, or all the other things that challenge us, Jesus has been there before and meets us there in order to bear our burdens with us and for us.

Mark's beginning is dark, you see, because it is realistic. Mark was writing to people intimately acquainted with suffering and hardship. Whether they have been persecuted for their faith or merely caught up in the confusion of the Roman War that destroyed the Temple is unclear, but it's tremendously clear
that Mark wants his people to know
that at the end of the day
the only place you'll find Jesus revealed for us
is precisely in the places of our pain,
brokenness, and vulnerability.

So, yes, this is a dark beginning.
And, truth be told, it will get darker.
But take note: it's in the darkest part of the story
that God's love and mercy is revealed most clearly,
clearly enough that even one of those
who put Jesus to death can finally see God at work
in and through this broken man.

Kevin Costner, one of the eulogists at Whitney Houston's funeral this past Saturday,
shared that as famous and successful as she was,
Whitney was forever plagued by a fear
that she wasn't good enough,
wasn't pretty or talented enough, to measure up.

Deep down, I suspect, we all share that fear.
Could it be that Whitney heard a sinister voice whispering in her ear—
a voice we have probably all heard—
“You’re not enough.”

We need to let God’s word drive this voice out—
Can we dare trust the grace of God’s love for each of us that tells us,
“don’t worry. You’re good enough”—
especially when we see that love revealed
in the strangest way, in the crucified one.

British author Graham Greene wrote—
You can’t conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone,
the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.

We begin this first Sunday in Lent,
driven by the Spirit with Jesus into the desert,
deep into the wilderness where our
choices confront us.
Like others before us, we may not understand the mystery of God’s grace in all of this,
but we will discover
that even in the barest places,
God’s grace meets us where we are and
does not leave us where it found us.
Oh, the places the Spirit will lead us!