

February 22, 2015

“Wild Beast and Angels”

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 25:1-10 ~ Mark 1:9-15

In just seven verses today Mark gives us three key episodes in Jesus’ life. In just seven verses Mark tells us that Jesus was baptized ... that Jesus was tested ... and then Jesus preached the good news. I could preach any of the three episodes today. I could talk a while about Jesus’ baptism ... his submission to death and burial ... his surrender to God, and his approval by God ... not just at the end ... when he had proven himself ... but from the very commencement of his mission in life.

Or, I could preach about Jesus’ preaching today. In only fifteen words (nineteen in English), Jesus makes two declarations and asserts two imperatives. The declaratives are about urgency and opportunity. “The time is fulfilled,” he declares. “The rule of God is here.” The imperatives follow naturally ... our only sensible response. “The time is fulfilled; the rule of God is here.” Therefore, you should “Turn and trust the good news.”

But I’m not going to preach about Jesus’ baptism or his proclamation today. It’s the “in between” section I want us to consider ... the mean time between Jesus’ baptism and his preaching the gospel. Matthew and Luke expand on Mark’s version of Jesus’ time of testing with stories that detail the three temptations of Christ. But Mark paints the picture in a few deft strokes. Mark tells us that after the baptism “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Mark says he was there for forty days. Mark says he was tested by “the Satan,” which means “the Adversary.” To this Mark adds the enigmatic paradox: “He was with the wild beasts; and the angels served him.” Wild beasts and angels! Now there’s a contrast! But that’s exactly where the test comes for most us between our baptism and our mission in life.

The three events are connected for Mark. In fact, you could almost say it’s an outline of his Jesus story to follow. Between beginning and ending Jesus is tested. Between commencement and completion Jesus faces the wild beasts and gets an assist from the angels. This is the arena where life happens for all of us.

And mind you, this “in between” time for Jesus is no accident. It’s God’s plan. The Spirit leads Jesus into the desert. Actually Mark says the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness – drags, forces, expels, casts forth. It is the same verb Genesis uses (in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) to tell us how God drove out Adam and Eve from Paradise after they disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. You may remember the Adversary was involved in that story, too. It is God’s intention that Jesus know what it means to be human ... to be caught in the

contest between evil and good ... to wander in a world inhabited by both wild beasts and angels. Indeed, Mark's gospel is the story of how Jesus defeats Satan and the demons ... and wins the cosmic battle between good and evil for us all. But before the victory can be declared, the battle takes him into the wilderness where we all live.

Of course, the wilderness has a special meaning for God's people in the Bible. Israel spent forty years wandering in the wilderness before they were ready to enter the promised land. In the wilderness, they were tested. In the wilderness they fell into idolatry and suffered the consequences. In the wilderness they complained against God. But the wilderness is also where God led them ... God fed them ... God forged them into a people. In the wilderness they learned to depend upon God alone for life.

Later David went into the wilderness to hide from his enemies until it was time for him to be crowned Israel's King. Later Elijah was fed by angels in the wilderness when he was running for his life from Queen Jezebel. And in the strength of that food he returned to Mount Sinai where God spoke to him in a still, small voice. Later Israel's prophets reminded the people of the lessons they should have learned in the wilderness.

But they didn't listen, and they lost everything. They went into exile in Babylon. In exile, Isaiah told the people to make a highway in the desert, to get ready for a new exodus with God. And once they were back in the land, they looked for a new anointed King, or Messiah ... through whom God would lead them to final victory against the powers of evil, violence, and death. As one of the popular writings from the time between the testaments prophesied:

*The devil shall flee from you,
and the wild beasts shall fear you,
and the Lord shall love you,
and the angels shall cleave to you.* (Test. Naph. 8:4).

Wild beasts and angels!

The early church picked up on Israel's wilderness theme. John had a vision of the church as a woman protected by God. "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days" (Rev. 12:6). Mark's own audience would not have found his reference to "wild beasts" so enigmatic. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, it was about this time that Christians were persecuted by Nero in the imperial city of Rome. Some were condemned to die by being torn apart by lions before the crowds in the Coliseum, the Roman version of the Super Bowl. Many of the early churches met on the fringes of society... secretly in people's homes, also at the edge of town ... in the cemeteries ... sometimes even in the desert. A few of those early believers even moved to the desert intentionally as a place to get away from the distractions of the world ... a place to focus on the soul's survival.

As early as the third century Christians began to set aside a special time of preparation to get ready for the experience of Good Friday and Easter ... those holy celebrations which mark the heart of our faith and the fulfillment of God's plan for humankind. They soon set the time as

forty days, remembering these forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness with the wild beasts and angels. They called this time “Lent” from the Latin word “Lengthen” because it coincided with the season when the days began to lengthen and winter moves towards spring with evidences of new life blossoming forth in nature. Lent was a time for fasting and self-discipline ... for self-denial and service ... for setting aside the luxuries of the flesh to concentrate on the needs of the spirit. It was a time to nurture the new life within ... the new life that blossoms into something lasting and real.

In the eyes of the world it was a strange practice, countercultural, perhaps even subversive to the chapter and verse of the social order. I mean, everybody knew the goal of life was to acquire, not to sacrifice. The joy of life was in pampering yourself, not denying yourself. The meaning of life was in self-advancement, gaining power over others so they had to serve you, not reducing your status by service to others. The Roman gods all helped people get what they wanted, and all the gods asked in return was that you be loyal to the emperor ... a good citizen respecting the given social order. And then, if the gods favored you, you might be one of the lucky few on top. On top is where everybody wanted to be. Except those weird Christians ... who spoke instead of self-denial and service ... of charity and preparing your soul for the world to come. Those crazy Christians.

I think the world has not changed so much in two thousand years, and our own social order is as close to ancient Rome’s as any other. Oh, they don’t throw us to the lions any more, thank God. We don’t have to worry about those wild beasts, do we? But then, maybe it would be easier to teach classes on lion wrestling than to deal with the sneaky beasts set loose upon us now. We don’t even see them coming. For instance, we all despise those people dealing illegal drugs. But how do we fight what the society sees as so much necessary collateral damage in lives destroyed by legal drugs like alcohol and tobacco, prescription medications and high caloric diets? Credit card debt on luxury spending, gambling on the internet, there’s just no shortage of legal ways to ruin your life. Even if many have to die to keep the industry going, others get rich off the profits so these things are not just legal; they’re advertised! I know I’m sounding like a meddling preacher today, but once in a while, I need to, y’all.

All of us are compromised by the culture in which we live. We are all addicted in various ways to the greed and violence and selfishness and abusive use of power so common in our time. We hate those who hate. We judge those who judge. But we are as self-righteous and arrogant in our behavior as those we reject. Even to us the very idea of Lent is a foreign, even quaint custom we take up lightly, as an occasional add-on to the busy schedules we must keep. How serious are we really about this business of spirituality and the high calling of our baptism to die to ourselves and live into Christ? But take a single step back and you can see that all the statistics show it and our lives bear witness, too. Our addiction to the common values of our culture ... greed, violence, power, self-indulgence ... are killing us. And a lot of other people, too.

We need Lent. We need to hear the message Jesus brought out of the wilderness: “The time is fulfilled; the rule of God is here. Turn, and trust the good news.” But before we can hear it ... before we can proclaim it ... we have to put ourselves in the place where we can hear it. I know very few of us can drop everything we’re doing, wipe the slate clean, go out into the desert to detox, and get right with God so we can start over. But all of us can take a Lenten journey of the

heart. We can set aside some time to be with God. We can let go of some of the time wasting entertainments that distract us. We can fast from some of the behaviors that damage us and others. We can move into a wilderness of creative possibility where we face down the wild beasts that threaten us and discover the angels God sends to nurture us.

What could be more opposed to the spirit of our age than the Spirit of Lent? We live in a day when our ethical standards have deteriorated to the point where people give themselves permission to indulge in the most destructive behaviors by saying, "I owe myself this." You won't see any commercials on television advising you to slow down, spend less, stop measuring yourself by the things you own. You won't find the ads in the newspaper urging you to simplify your life, pursue beauty and truth, build healthy friendships, help the people torn to pieces by the wild beasts of modern life. You have to get those values from somewhere else.

Anthony de Mello tells the story of a man who got lost in a desert. He thought he saw some water in the distance, but it seemed to recede as he approached it. In a panic, he ran to reach it, only to realize it was a shimmering mirage. He turned this way and that, parched, desperate. He tripped and fell over a dried branch, and lay there exhausted, ready to die. There was nothing but silence, and the sound of his own breathing. But he caught his breath and heard in the silence the sound of a faint murmur. Rising, he moved slowly, methodically towards the sound, stopping now and then and getting very still until he could discern again the soft murmur leading him on. Finally he came upon it, the bubbling water of a small spring. And he knelt to drink deeply of the fresh cool relief.

There are ways in which we wander every day in the wilderness of a world where nothing satisfies our thirst for life ... nothing satisfies our hunger for substance. We wrestle with wild beasts within and without. As Frederick Buechner says, "There are times for all of us when life seems without purpose or meaning, when we wake to a sense of chaos like a great cat with its paws on our chest sucking our breath." That's when we need to let the Spirit drive us out into the wilderness of a different kind ... where we might meet the angels God sends to care for us ... where we can stop and quiet ourselves ... listen closely and follow the soft murmurs of the fountain of life, until, finding it at last, we drink deeply and are revived. "(God) turns a desert into pools of water," writes the psalmist, "a parched land into springs of water" (Psa 107:35).

Beloved, Lent is here. God knows we need it. Let us go into the wilderness and meet God. May we pray?

In these forty days of preparation, O God, we remember Jesus' courage in fighting the Adversary. We remember his obedience to your will, his grounding in your Word, his willingness to enter the world of struggle we endure every day that he might show us the way out of the wilderness and back to your garden of life. In these forty days help us also to follow him, to find your angels among us, to choose the ways of life over the ways of death, and to discover the fountain of life that our souls may be refreshed. In these forty days, O God, let a new life of the Spirit blossom forth among us, that dying to the world we might rise into life that is life indeed, life abundant, life eternal. In these forty days prepare us to hear "The time is fulfilled; the rule of God is here. Turn, and trust the good news." Help us to hear, turn and trust. Amen.

