

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday Feb. 21, 2021 Lent 1B
Text: Mark 1:9-15
Christopher McLaren
Theme: The Wild Beasts

In Mark's Gospel Jesus' time in the wilderness sounds more like a pop-quiz. The whole test is contained in a few brief verses. "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 angels waited on him." That's it just these two pithy sentences about Jesus' wilderness exam.

Our everyday way of thinking holds that heaven and earth are separate and distinct spheres and distant from one another. But Jesus' experience in the Jordan River as it is symbolically expressed shatters this notion. Jesus comes out of the depths of the water, leaving behind sin, what separates the human and divine. In that Spirit-soaked moment, the heavens are torn apart, not temporarily, but forever. As he rises out of the water he pulls earth toward heaven and heaven rushes to meet this beautiful human being.

"God has ripped the heavens apart irrevocably at Jesus' baptism, never to shut them again. Through this gracious gash in the universe, he has poured forth his Spirit into the earthly realm." J. Marcus, in Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary*).

I love the phrase this "gracious gash," which allows the love of God to be poured into the person of Jesus. If we want to conceptualize it, the human rising toward God is met by the divine descending toward the human. The human is not cut off from the divine. The divine is not forever other and unreachable. Instead, in the person of Jesus the human and the divine are joined. The intimacy of the scene is evident in the text, a loving father embraces a faithful son. No longer is there a division between the human and the divine. Connection replaces division. Love replaces estrangement. A new condition, a new possibility is revealed in the person of Jesus as he struggles up out of the muddy waters of the Jordan.

There is only one problem. Jesus' baptism does not seem to match our expectations that everyone lives happily ever after. Rather, the Spirit, immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days, an obvious reminder of the Israel's time wandering in the wilderness trying to learn the art of covenant faithfulness. Jesus, the Beloved One, the obedient Son, does not get a privileged life. His baptism is not a "get out of jail free card," but the bedrock for human struggle. Jesus is loved, he is connected to God, he is known to heaven, and he will be tempted like you and I are tempted.

Mark tells us that Jesus, “was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” Satan the Adversary is associated with the wild beasts, who become symbols of the opposition and violent attacks that will come Jesus’ way if he continues on the path toward union with God and creation.

If you’ve ever been alone in the wilderness without much protection and heard the sounds of a wolf pack or had bear visit your campsite, you understand “wild beasts” viscerally. Wild beasts in the desert conjure up fear and danger in a way that makes the temptations of Jesus seem all that more real. At the same time, I’m a little uncomfortable connecting the “wild beasts” to Satan and as somehow opposed to Jesus’ mission in the world. The wild animals of this passage are also part of God’s good creation and this text does little to give us a proper love and respect for them nor does it sound a note stewardship for the diversity of creatures on this earth. There is a subtle way in which this passage works against, caring for God’s creation and I want to acknowledge it. There is something beautiful about preserving wilderness and wildness. Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, enchanted, beautiful, and intriguing offering grace to any who look deeply.

St. Mark’s gospel is not simply good news it turns out, it is good news in a bad world. Instead of trying to think of Satan as an individual encountering Jesus, I think it is more helpful to envision Satan as the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that inflict suffering on people and indeed creation itself. The adversary of God manifests itself through these people, groups and social and political structures and turns them into “wild beasts” who devour God’s good creation. They do battle with Jesus because they sense in him their precise opposite, the force of life, healing, compassion, forgiveness, and love. There are forces that seek to divide people from God and from one another and there is the Spirit of God at work uniting people to the divine and to one another. This is the cosmic battle that Mark’s gospel symbolizes in Jesus’ desert exam.

Jesus emerges from the desert proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Jesus is not intimidated and is sustained in his preaching of the Good News by the ministering angels and the sure knowledge of who he is, the beloved of God.

Jesus not only preaches the good news of God, but he also embodies the good news of God. He has been filled with the Spirit of God’s love, has survived the temptations of the enemy, and offers connection to God to all who will listen and follow. Discovering a relationship with God is the good news that Jesus offers.

But for the kingdom of God to be realized there must be human reception. Jesus asks that humans repent and believe in the good news. Repentance involves turning

away from ways of thinking and acting that create or reinforce separation from God, other people, and creation. And this is no easy task, as these ways of thinking and acting are many and complex, interwoven with one another and often are masquerading as true knowledge or sometimes as righteous acts. Repentance is not a one-time event or a Lenten activity, it is a way of life, a way of constantly allowing the Spirit to transform one from the inside out, so that we might have the mind of Christ within us.

Why is it so difficult to repent and believe in the Gospel, that we are loved by God, and are called to demonstrate and embody that love in the time and space of our earthly life?

I think that it is because each of us harbor so many other beliefs that do not fit into this Good News and are not actually part of God's desire for our way of life and for human thriving.

Our lives are contested ground. The author, Beatrice Bruteau, names some of these beliefs that we could identify as "wild beasts:"

"Health and beauty, money and power are necessary to happiness."

"I am identified by my body, personality, and possessions."

"My welfare is more important than yours"

"No one willingly gives up power"

"The world is here for us to exploit"

"No one can be trusted"

"There have to be winners and losers"

"They hurt me so I must get even"

"I can't feel good about myself unless I am better than somebody"

"Some people are supposed to dominate other people"

"If everyone were good, life would be boring."

Of course, we are not always aware that we hold these beliefs that keep us from embracing the Good News that Jesus proclaims. Ferreting them out is the hard and ongoing work of spiritual growth. Sometimes we can discover our beliefs by tracing them back to their source. We may shrug off injustice because, "some people get the shaft and some don't" We read about tragedy and find ourselves saying, "Oh, thank God it wasn't me."

Repentance involves discovering and letting go of beliefs and ways of being that are in conflict with the Good News of God in Christ. If we want to get rid of competing or conflicting beliefs it may be helpful to figure out where these beliefs come from. They could be coming from our mindless internalization of cultural assumptions that surrounds us, every one of us is vulnerable here. Or it is also possible that we have taken a painful or frightening experience and universalized it instead of allowing it to be a partial and painful piece of life in need of healing.

A further step in the life of repentance is to simply realize that we hold such beliefs. We might want to think that these beliefs have been imposed upon us but in truth we are actually holding the belief, nurturing it, sustaining it by our patterns of language, decisions and actions. It is surprising how realizing the sources of our competing beliefs and bringing them into consciousness begins to erode their power over us. Our ability to acknowledge them helps us to find space within our own minds and hearts to loosen their grip over us so that they can eventually lose their power and begin to fall away.

It is helpful to consider where we are vulnerable to temptation. Do you know the species of Wild Beasts that out there waiting in the dark to devour you?

I came across a story of a young pastor who met with a group of youth who were intent upon trying to figure out how to be more dedicated followers of Jesus. The youth were looking for a little encouragement, but the pastor basically told them. If you want to follow Jesus, **"It isn't going to be easy!"** He said something like, "I know that you may have had Jesus presented to you as the solution to a lot of your problems. Well, I'm sorry to say this but, "I'm here to tell you that from my experience, following Jesus is often the beginning of problems you would have never had before you met Jesus!"

The youth began to respond in various ways to the pastor with perhaps more candor than one might expect. It seems to me that they are describing their own "wild beasts," their own temptation and testing.

"Popularity. I care a lot about what other people think of me, too much. I do and say many things trying to get other people's approval."

"I'm really bothered about some of the things Jesus says about money. I like nice things. My parents have given me nice things all my life, and I worry that maybe I like nice things more than I like pleasing Jesus."

"Doesn't Jesus tell us that we are to risk and help people in need. I think that was the point of the story about the Good Samaritan. I look at my life right now and I've got to admit that most of the things I do, I do for myself. I'm in high school building an exceptionally good resume and transcript to get into the college of my choice. That's just for me and I wonder what Jesus thinks about that?"

"The other day, one of the guys, after the game, told a joke that was really demeaning about women. Why did I not speak up? I think of myself as a person who likes challenges. I'm not afraid to tackle hard jobs. But I'm beginning to wonder if I'm tough enough to be a Christian."

I don't know what your "Wild beasts" might be but what I can say is that all of us have some circling us. We've all been in the wilderness of Covid for quite some time. We've been living with our "wild beasts" in close quarters for some time now and

we may know them even better after this enforced isolation and self-reflection. What I can also say is that it's no accident that you and I experience wilderness because so did Jesus. But it is also true that the angels ministered to him and they will minister to you as well as you confront the wild beasts that prowl your life. And that same Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness also brought Jesus through the wilderness.

To be perfectly honest, repenting and believing in the Good News of Christ is not a project for Lent. It won't be accomplished by giving up chocolate or Netflix for 40 days. The process of placing the love of God at the center of your life is the adventure we call becoming a Christian and it permeates all of life. We don't ever finish repenting and believing. Conversion continues. We don't get done letting go of false beliefs or flawed ways of responding to life. There is always more depth to God's love that needs to be allowed into the center of our lives. But the Good News is this that there is a "gracious gash" in the heavens and God's divine love has been poured out into our hearts. And our need is simply to make room for that love, to allow it to flow in and through us more and more that we too might become beloved sons and daughters of the most high.

Note: This sermon is based upon the spiritual reflection and teaching of John Shea in his spiritual commentary on the book of Mark entitled Eating with the Bridegroom. I am deeply indebted to him for this understanding of repentance, the notion of placing the love of God at the center of one's being and living out of that center. May we all find this to be true in our own lives more and more.