

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

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God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Genesis 9:8-17

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.” *Mark 1:9-15**

“...and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

Here we are – in that place of wilderness we call Lent. Again. In some ways it seems like we never ended last year’s Lent; it seems like we’ve had a whole year of wilderness. The Gospel message is familiar as we move back to the beginning of Mark, to the baptism of Jesus, and the voice from heaven. This time though, we hear what happens after the baptism. Jesus was still dripping wet, the words of the voice of heaven still ringing in his ears when “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.”

Mark’s listeners would have picked up right away on the number forty. That was how many years the people of Israel had wandered in the wilderness. It was also how many days the rain lasted while Noah was in the ark. In both instances, the people found themselves in a time of uncertainty and vulnerability as they faced wild beasts both real and imagined. Forty always means “a long time” in scripture.

In the account of the flood, Noah had been instructed by God to build an ark and load it with every living creature – and plenty of them could be classified as wild beasts! Our reading from Genesis today recounts what happens after the flood when God again establishes a covenant, not only with Noah and his family, but also with every living creature. Notice that this phrase, every living creature, is repeated four times in this passage. Living creatures, even the wild beasts, are a part of creation, a part of our lives.

Life can be an overwhelming, challenging, and exhausting wilderness sometimes. I am reminded of a children's book I grew up with and then read to my own children. Perhaps you remember "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak. The plot of the book is based on the consequences of a little boy's mischief. One night Max dresses up in his wolf suit and does all kinds of things he shouldn't, like chasing the dog with a fork. His mother scolds him and calls him a "WILD THING!" Max is so mad he shouts back, "I'LL EAT YOU UP!" As a result, his mother sends him to bed without any supper.

Max's imagination transforms his bedroom into an extraordinary setting, with a forest and an ocean and a little boat that Max sails in until he comes to a land full of wild things. Although they look and sound very fierce, Max is able to tame them with a single glance. They all realize Max is "...the most wild thing of all" and make him their king. Max and the wild things have a fine time creating a rumpus until Max begins to want to be, as the story goes, "...where someone loved him best of all."

Max's fantasy ends when he smells his dinner. Despite much protesting from the wild things, Max sails back to his own room where he finds his supper waiting for him. He realizes that being a wild thing may not be all it's cracked up to be, and that being a wild thing is separating him from those whom he loves and who love him.

So, what does this children's story have to do with the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness? In the wilderness Jesus came to understand who he was and how his messianic purpose would be fulfilled. In the wilderness Jesus became completely vulnerable and modeled for us the trust and dependence on God that we need in order to live in the wildernesses of our own lives. In the wilderness we learn about our own wild beasts and angels. We turn away from our own more sinful mischief and are more and more transformed into the image of Jesus.

Wild beasts and wildernesses are a reality of life. The wilderness can be the place where we come face to face with our true selves and with God. St. Augustine wisely noted that we cannot come to know God until we have come to know ourselves.

Lent is a time when we can spend some time facing our own wild beasts. All of us have our temptations, our weaknesses, our faults, but as we prayed in our collect, God knows the weaknesses of all of us. God knows us. And if we will go into the wilderness, that is where we will begin to recognize those wild beasts that separate us from the love of God. There we will face the wild beasts that control us, and in wrestling with them we will grow in wisdom compassion and love. We will come to know God more deeply.

If we allowed the Spirit to drive us out into the wilderness, if we spent some time each day with God in holy solitude, what might float up from the deep waters of our souls? Perhaps the silence would reveal to us where the wild beasts might be roaming in our lives.

This Lent consider spending some time in the wilderness with the expectation that there may be some wild beasts waiting for you. But expect God's angels as well. They will be there to help you and wait on you, for God has covenanted never to leave us alone in the wilderness. Then, like Max, come home from the wilderness time to the meal that is waiting for you here at God's table of love! Amen.