

WITH THE WILD BEASTS
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Texts: Genesis 9:8-17 & Mark 1:9-15

Genesis 9:8-17

Then 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."

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."

In his autobiography, Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, describes the kind of long, sleepless nights we all experience from time to time, when we're going through something difficult, and we can't stop fretting and worrying. "With the going down of the sun," he writes, "my faith failed and the clammy fears gathered about my heart. Those were awful nights, nights of despair, nights charged with the bitterness of death. In my age as in my youth, night brings me many a deep remorse."

It's into that kind of dark night of the soul that Jesus is plunged in the gospel reading this morning. Mark says he was "in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." And then he adds an interesting detail that tells us a lot about what that period must have been like for him. He says that Jesus was "with the wild beasts."

Wild beasts show up a lot in scripture. There's the lion that threatens David's sheep. There's the winged lion and the bear gnawing on it's own ribs in Daniel's dream. There's the dragon with seven heads and ten horns in Revelation. None of these are creatures you'd want to meet in person. The Greek word for "beasts" refers specifically to animals with a brutal nature, animals that stalk their prey and pounce on their backs and tear them to pieces.

For Jesus, being tempted in the wilderness is like facing animals like that, animals that are threatening to devour him, not in body but in spirit. They're threatening to devour his faith in God and his sense of purpose. They're threatening to consume his ministry before it even gets off the ground.

Now, we know they aren't successful because after he leaves the wilderness, Jesus continues doing what he came to do—proclaim the kingdom of God. If anything, his faith and his sense of purpose are stronger and clearer than ever—just like Noah and his family in the first reading. They've just made it through the flood, their own dark night of the soul, and on the other side of that experience, they establish a new

covenant with God—a covenant that will never be broken; a covenant that will last forever.

But what about us? What about the dark nights of the soul that we go through? What about the beasts that come for us with the going down of the sun? When clammy fears gather, and despair descends, and death looms about, it's hard not to lose faith. It's hard not to lose direction. So how can we make it through those times in one piece? How can we maybe even come out of those experiences feeling closer to God than ever?

Well, let's take a look at how Jesus manages to do it.

Mark's version of the temptation in the wilderness is only one sentence long.

But he packs a lot into it, and there's a lot we can learn if we go through it bit by bit. First of all, there's the placement. Mark puts Jesus' temptation right after his baptism—right after the moment when his identity as God's Son is revealed in what seems like a private vision. Jesus sees the sky torn open and the Spirit descending, and he hears the voice from heaven, but he seems to be the only one. This seems like a purely interior experience. If you look closely at the text, there's no external confirmation from anyone else who's there. Nobody else points up at the sky and says, "Hey, look at that!" Nobody else hears the voice and says, "Where's that coming from?"

This is an event that only Jesus seems to know is happening, and that makes sense because that's usually how it is for us, too. When God calls us to do something, it usually starts out as a thought or a feeling—something only we are aware of—and it's only when we start acting on it that we get confirmation from the people around us. And that confirmation has a snowball effect.

Let's say the thought of being a Deacon keeps popping into your head, and for a long time you keep that thought to yourself, and it doesn't go any further. It's just like this invisible finger that keeps poking you. But

one day you tell a friend at church about it, and they say, “Yeah, you’d be perfect for that.” So now you feel like, Maybe this is real? and you go talk to the Nominating Committee, and they say the same thing: “You’d make a wonderful Deacon. You have all the gifts.” So they put your name on the ballot, and there’s a congregational vote, and the whole church confirms your call. The whole community says, “Yes, God is calling you to do this.”

But that’s not where it ends.

You’re serving as a Deacon now, you’re living out your call, and everything’s right with the world. But guess what? Just when you’re starting your new ministry, that’s when you start having doubts. That’s when you start questioning yourself. Am I really cut out for this? It seems like a lot of work. I don’t know if I can do it. Maybe I should quit.

This is what often happens. The minute we start doing whatever it is God has called us to do, all these voices start whispering in our ears, and all these fears start chipping away at our confidence, until we’re ready to give up.

This is what happens to Jesus, too. He comes up out of the water, and he has this vision, and immediately, Mark says, he’s driven out into the wilderness, where he faces all these temptations, and he’s surrounded by all these beasts, trying to defeat him—trying to turn him away from his mission. But he’s able to resist and stay true to himself. Because at the same time that all these forces are working against him, God is working for him. The angels are waiting on him, Mark says, giving him strength and comfort.

And you know what? Angels wait on us, too.

They may not have wings, and they may not have halos, but they’re angels nonetheless. They’re people who show up just when we need them. They’re people who give us encouragement just when we’re feeling tired; people who lift us up just when

we’re feeling down; people who make us laugh just when we’re ready to cry.

We’ve all had people like that in our lives—people who ministered to us, people who kept us strong in our faith, people who helped us keep going—whether they knew that’s what they were doing or not. I certainly wouldn’t be a pastor today if I hadn’t known people like that. I would’ve given up a long time ago. I don’t think I would’ve even made it through first semester of seminary, to tell you the truth.

So the temptation in the wilderness is a lesson for all of us. It’s a lesson on how to face those wild beasts that surround us on those “nights of despair,” as Clemens describes them—those dark nights of the soul we all experience. It’s a lesson on how to not only survive those times but to come out of them with renewed faith and confidence, knowing that God is always there for us, and knowing that we are always there for each other. Amen.