

The Beasts and the Angels

How Jesus's time in the wilderness reminds us of our own journey

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Text: *Mark 1:9-15*

Lent 1B | February 22, 2015

The Temptation

We're taken back this morning to the beginning: the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John. Taken back to the beginning of Jesus's ministry: the moment in which he gets started. And we read again of the baptism in the water, of the sky breaking apart, the Spirit coming down like a dove onto Jesus, and the voice of GOD breaks the silence

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

But we don't stay in the river today. No, we don't get to swim or lounge on floating chairs with cold drinks with umbrellas in them; no matter how much this cold winter makes that sound so good.

We're going to the desert. Into the wilderness for what might be our traditional Temptation Sunday. Like a would-be adventurer, braving the elements, we enter into this story like a story of survival, like that real-life young man, captured in the book, then a movie of testing himself in the Alaskan wilderness. A young man doing something so incomprehensible, reckless, even. And yet so romantic as going into the wild alone.

We take tests of faith like tall tails of ambiguous truth and we thrust upon Jesus, this moment **out there** with a level of heroism, of resisting the devil, of dealing with temptation that would consume a lesser man. We're used to reading the temptation in the other synoptic gospels, *Matthew* and *Luke* where it speaks to the details of the time, of temptations of power, authority, pride; these truly human desires which Jesus somehow resists. These two reveal the power of Jesus's resistance.

In Mark, we don't get anything about the temptations themselves. I think deliberately. The evangelist gives us two sentences, full of equal strength for all its elements:

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.

Not rich with details like the baptism, but rich with aspects. *The Spirit drove him there. Into the Wilderness. Forty days. Tempted by the Tempter. He was with the wild beasts. The angels waited on him.*

It doesn't strike me that this is narrative or even accounting. We don't get to watch Jesus in the desert, perhaps struggling. In fact, the only element that sounds descriptive, the only one that locates him is this: "and he was **with** the wild beasts".

The picture the Evangelist paints is not of the temptation itself, that is only told to us that it happens, but the image we walk away with is the rest of it: whisking him into the wilderness, his presence among the beasts, and the angels who wait on him.

The Gambit

So *this* is the hard part of the story, the part that causes such torment for Christians when reading the Temptation, the part that *Matthew* and *Luke* allow us to ignore, overwhelmed by the details of the Temptation and the voice given to the Tempter. It is this piece that causes us such trouble: that the Spirit drives Jesus here, that the Spirit takes Jesus from his baptism and straight into the desert, into the wilds with the animals. And it is out there, in the wilderness, that the angels are with him.

This idea, of GOD directing traffic, so confounds us, that we would say *why? Why take him here to be tempted? What's your game, GOD?*

And we ask this because we're lost in the temptation. Lost in what we think is going on (a test) and think who is responsible for it (Satan) and think who initiates it (GOD). But that's not this evangelist's gambit.

The Beasts and the Angels

The beasts, the angels, all that surround Jesus in the wilderness are not the human companions he would recruit *after* this sojourn, this time of quarantine in the desert, in the wilds; in this time of purification. It is the natural world and the spiritual world that surround him. It is all that GOD creates and all that GOD is responsible for that populate Jesus's world for those 40 days.

Jesus has what he needs to survive in this world. He isn't a survivalist with a pack full of tools and food or a basement full of canned goods. He has what GOD provides.

For the evangelist, this has to be the crux of the temptation story. That it isn't actually a temptation. Or at least a real one, anyway. It isn't about Jesus denying his power or denying his place or putting GOD to the test. It isn't about the trials or the testing, like a messianic Job. This isn't GOD thrusting Jesus into a trap to see how he does. He isn't putting Jesus to the test anymore than Jesus would put GOD to the test.

The evangelist downplays the temptation, and the Tempter. It is given the same weight as the other elements in the list: the beasts and the angels.

So this thing we call The Temptation of Jesus isn't really about temptation, or about the Tempter or about GOD and the problem of evil at all. It's about experience, creation, and GOD. It is about living in this world that GOD has made, rather than in the cities and communities we have made, so that he can connect with GOD. So that he can know GOD. To connect with the mission, with the dream that GOD has for us; for humanity; for the whole world. A dream of reconciliation and of restored community: people restored with each other, but not only the people. A restoring with all of creation and with our creator.

Mercy

We get the Temptation Story at the start of Lent as if we are supposed to see our own 40 days as being in that wilderness. I really like that idea. As long as we don't see it as a trial, or as a time of

resisting temptation. That self-denial is a vehicle for resisting the Tempter. This isn't at all what Jesus is doing in any of the temptation stories.

So Lent is not about resisting temptation, but about experiencing the life we're living, in pursuing a better relationship with all that GOD has created: our world and its people: and with GOD as our creator. It is a time of wrestling with our own faith and our own understandings of the workings of the world and of those real temptations.

But the most important part of Lent, the part that is so easily overlooked and dismissed by those of us who have been through many Lents before this one, the part we are easily distracted from, is that it is a season, not of resistance, but of preparation. It is a season of preparing new members of the faith to join the community through baptism. It is a season of restoring the notorious sinners to the community they nearly destroyed. It is a season when all the rest of us who have been on this rollercoaster before, who have dealt with pain and suffering, who have felt the joyous exultation of true happiness in faith are reminded of those who struggle, are reminded of the mercy GOD has shown us and the grace we've been given. And when we repent for our darkest sins and we hear of another's repentance and true desire to change, we are moved to bring them back in, to make this broken family whole again.

This is our story in Lent. This is who we are called to be. Reconcilers and Hope-bringers. In all of our own weakness and torment, in all of our darkest moments and all of our arrogance, we are called to restore as we were restored, to show mercy as we have been shown mercy.

I was reminded last week of what Thomas Merton wrote about Ash Wednesday. I think his words can easily be applied to all of Lent:

“Nevertheless, the liturgy of Ash Wednesday is not focused on the sinfulness of the penitent but on the mercy of God. The question of sinfulness is raised precisely because this is a day of mercy, and the just do not need a savior.”

May we come to know that kind of mercy, truly believe that we have been given that mercy, so that we can better know GOD as the source of all mercy.