

Wild Beasts and Angels

“And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus 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.”

That, in its entirety, is Mark’s account of Jesus’ sojourn and temptation in the wilderness, after the Holy Spirit came upon him at his Baptism. That’s it. Two sentences. Five clauses—five syntactical subunits—that describe the forty-day experience of Jesus that is the symbolic and devotional foundation of *our* forty-day experience of Lent. Five clauses that tell us what our Lent ought to be about if we are going to follow Jesus, if we want to do what Jesus does. It’s not much to go on. Matthew and Luke, in their accounts of Jesus’ temptation, give us a whole lot more: an appearance by Satan, three very specific and very seductive temptations the devil sets before Jesus, and three very firm and very scripturally based refusals that Jesus sets before the devil. Matthew and Luke give us some sort of inkling, some sort of hint, about what sorts of temptations we are to be wrestling with, and what sorts of faithfulness we are to be reaching for, in order to be like Jesus in our Lenten time. With Mark—not so much. So today, when we have Mark’s account given to us in the lectionary, we have to dig a little deeper to see how this story speaks to us.

Mark doesn’t give us three discrete temptations; but he *does* give us two particular details that I find really fascinating. Mark says that Jesus is with the wild beasts, and that angels are serving him.

Wild beasts and angels. At first, those two things sound like quite a contrast: Wild beasts are frightening, threatening, dangerous—maybe even, in this case, demonic—maybe even satanic. Angels, on the other hand, are comforting, reassuring, strengthening, empowering—like the Spirit that came on Jesus at his Baptism. At first glance, the wild beasts and the angels seem like the two poles between which Jesus must struggle in his wilderness experience.

But several years ago I read a different interpretation of the wild beasts and angels, and that has influenced the way I’ve read this passage ever since. That commentator pointed out that Mark says Jesus is *with* the wild beasts—not *against* them, not *opposing* them, not *resisting* them, not *frightened* of them—but *with* them, *close* to them, *among* them. It’s as if Jesus and the wild beasts are creating a new sort of relationship, in which the typical roles of predator and prey, hunter and hunted, victim and victor, will no longer define how they are to get along. In fact, it’s as if Jesus is harking back to the kind of relationship with wild nature that God originally intended, as described in the Creation story. The second chapter of Genesis tells us that God made all the animals to be *companions* to the human being—not predators or beasts of burden or frightening presences—but companions. In God’s original intention for Creation, what God really wanted was for human nature and wild nature to live together in patterns of relationship based on giving and receiving in generosity and love. God’s intention for nature was for it to grow and flourish and be fruitful and multiply; and God’s intention for humans was tend nature, care for it, enjoy it, and help nature to flourish. Sin marred and disrupted that giving and receiving, and made the wild beasts something frightening and scary to human beings. But Jesus in the wilderness is restoring that relationship, recreating again a way of living in nature with giving and receiving, generosity and love. Jesus is restoring the relationship God wants all human beings, and the whole natural world, to have—because Jesus is *with* the wild beasts.

And it’s not just the natural world that Jesus is restoring to relationship. Mark says that angels waited on Jesus—and that suggests that there is a *supernatural* relationship here as well. For Jesus in the wilderness, the angels are no longer transcendent, awesome, so-intense-they’re-kind-of-dangerous presences; but angels wait on him, angels serve his needs, angels look out for him, angels share with him in giving and receiving in generosity and love. And that relationship between humans and the spiritual world is also part of God’s original intention in Creation. The third chapter of Genesis says that in the Garden of Eden God would go walking in the cool of the day, at the time of the evening breeze—before the disruption of sin, God wasn’t just way up there in a transcendent heaven, but God came walking along, part of everyday life, right there around the corner. Genesis doesn’t say anything about *angels* visiting Adam and Eve in Eden; but there were stories in the Jewish tradition about how God’s angels watched over the original humans and kept company with them. Ezekiel mentions the

“guardian cherub” that accompanied Adam in Eden—and several centuries later, the poet John Milton in his epic *Paradise Lost* has a long scene in which the archangel Raphael comes to Adam and Eve and instructs them in heavenly wisdom. Part of God’s original intention in Creation was for the human world and the spirit world to be in close relationship.

Of course, nowadays we tend not to read these Genesis stories as being literally and historically factual—we tend to read them in a more imaginative way—but the *point* is that these stories in their imaginative way bear witness to a fundamental belief that God’s intention for human beings is that we live in relationships of giving and receiving in generosity and love with the spiritual world, and the human world, and the natural world. That’s what God wants for us. That is what we allow to become disrupted and damaged by the power of sin.

But when Jesus goes out into the wilderness, when Jesus lives with wild beasts and angels, Jesus is restoring those relationships, Jesus is recreating the way God really wants human beings to be, Jesus is beginning again the great mission and the great adventure of being human—and according to Mark, *this* time Jesus is doing it *right*.

And it is that kind of restored relationship into which Jesus invites us now. As we begin our forty days of Lent, in faithful imitation of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, we are invited to be with wild beasts and angels, we are invited to think again about how we relate to nature, and how we relate to each other, and how we relate to the realm of the spirit. We are invited to let the Holy Spirit drive us out of ways of violence and predation and manipulation and greed, we’re invited to repent of those sins—and at the same time we are invited to let the Spirit empower us for ways of serving, giving and receiving, sharing and supporting, letting heaven and earth come together in us to create new possibilities for living out God’s love.

So what actual steps, what real disciplines might we engage this Lent to help restore those right relationships? Maybe this Lent would be a time for you and your household to think about restoring relationships with nature, to become more intentional about environmental care—maybe this would be a good time to take a closer look at your garbage, and take steps toward reducing and reusing and recycling. Perhaps this Lent you might take up a discipline of restoring relationships in the human community. Today has been designated Episcopal Relief and Development Sunday throughout the entire Episcopal Church, and we’re invited today to be mindful of how ERD helps people recover from disasters and improve their daily lives and build up relationships of well-being in places of poverty and need all around the world. The traditional Lenten discipline of almsgiving, in this case making a donation to ERD, would be a way of helping to restore those human relationships. And this Lent can be a time to build up spiritual relationships as well. Prayer and scripture-reading are important Christian practices all the time, but we often focus on them more in Lent; here at Trinity, in addition to our Sunday worship services, we have opportunities to come together for scriptures and prayers at Morning Prayer on Tuesdays and Healing Prayer on Wednesdays and Evening Prayer on Thursdays; perhaps this Lent would be a time for you to participate in one or more of those services, and add a new dimension to your prayer life, building up your relationship with the world of the spirit. We witness to another spiritual relationship in our Commitment Sunday today, as we present on the altar our pledges of financial support for the church for the rest of 2009—because making a pledge is much more than just a financial transaction, it’s a spiritual discipline, it’s the way we make our resources and ourselves available for doing the work of mission and ministry and relationship-building God gives the church to do. Because building those relationships is what the church is all about, because all our restored relationships, with nature and with humanity and with spirit, all our relationships in Christ start *here*, here in this community of Baptism, here in this gathering for Eucharist, here where we strengthened for service by being fed with earthly creatures of bread and wine that are also spiritual food of Christ’s Body and Blood. All the penitence, all the discipline, of Lent is about restoring right relationships.

In our Gospel today we hear how Jesus went out to be with wild beasts and angels, and thereby restored the patterns of right relationship God wants for all of us. Let it be our prayer today that we too may live those right relationships, in this holy season of Lent, and in all our seasons of mission and service and prayer. Amen.