

Sermon, St. David's, Lent 1, 2/18/24

So if you've been at church much in the past two months, you're pretty darn familiar with the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, and here we are in it again, re-reading parts that we read in Advent as well as on the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord right after Christmas ended. Today we are rereading these parts because the first Sunday of Lent always focuses on Jesus's temptation in the wilderness for forty days, since our forty-day season of Lent is based on that biblical incident.

But Mark only takes two verses to describe this forty-day affair, whereas Luke and Matthew, whose stories we use in other Lents, take a lot longer.

Besides brevity, one significant difference between Mark's version of the story and the other two is that in Mark, the Holy Spirit immediately *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness. In the other two versions, Jesus was *led* by the Holy Spirit. There seems to be more consent implied when we're talking about someone being led somewhere. We can choose to follow or not. "Driving" sounds more relentless. Sounds like something Jesus didn't have control over. Makes me think of Lent itself, the change of seasons, time passing. It happens whether we want it to or not. And Lent is here now, whether we welcome it or not. How are we going to spend these next forty days in the wilderness?

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in Matthew and Luke show actual dialogue between Jesus and the devil. But not Mark. Satan just gets a phrase. Wild beasts and angels get the same amount of airtime as Satan does in Mark's account.

That makes me wonder whether in years when we are focusing on Mark, we should pay as much attention to wild beasts and angels as we do to temptation.

Many of us mimic Christ's time in the wilderness or desert by giving up or taking something on for Lent. Have you done that? This year, I am taking on praying the Litany of Penitence from the Ash Wednesday service. That Litany resonates with me, especially the language of impatience. Of self-indulgent appetites and ways. Envy of those more fortunate. Intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts. Negligence in prayer and worship: all of that resonates with me, because I fall short in all of those ways.

Praying this litany daily during Lent, I hope, will help me become a better Christian, or at least a more aware Christian. More faithful. Less self-indulgent and less envious.

But like many of you, I've also tried giving up things for Lent in previous years, like meat, bread, buying books, violent movies and television. One dismal year I even gave up watching *Vanderpump Rules*. Such disciplines can be helpful if they help us make more room for God.

But this year, I'm wondering about those wild beasts and angels, since Mark gives them equal space to the temptation.

What do you think of those beasts? Some translations use wild animals instead, and to me, that gives a very different atmosphere. Animals sound less menacing to me than "beasts." There are lots of animals in the desert, and perhaps Jesus took comfort in some of them. Perhaps we can be

encouraged, during this season of Lent, to keep our eyes open for wild animals. I'm partial to birds, and this time of year, some of them are choosing mates and beginning to build nests. While we get a little more light every day, we are still in a dark time of year, which means more opportunity to see nocturnal animals. When I drove to the Ash Wednesday service last week, I saw a family of three deer in a neighbor's lawn, my car lights illuminating them. Even though I know deer are pests and all that, seeing them still feels magical to me.

Maybe Jesus saw animals during his time in the wilderness and they brought him comfort somehow. But the translation "beasts" makes me question that. Beasts sound menacing. Beasts makes me think of hungry coyotes eying Jesus at times he's weak with hunger, skulking around, making him worry that they might attack. Beasts make me think of those temptations with which we are always surrounded, like those listed in the litany of penitence. Pride. Hypocrisy. The way we exploit each other. Our dishonesty in our daily life and work. Uncharitable thoughts about our neighbors. While Mark does not say that Jesus fasted, the other two gospel accounts do, and that weakened state, it seems, would make him more susceptible to beasts, whether literal or figurative.

Are there beasts ever present in your life that you are battling this Lent? What are they? Is there anything you can do about them?

Finally, we hear that angels waited on Jesus. These angels show up in Matthew as well, but here in Mark they get as much attention as the entire temptation does, so they loom larger in my mind.

I think many of us have a skewed idea about angels, picturing little chubby Cupids flying around, but that's not a biblical concept. Cupid is a Greek god, not a Christian angel. Angels in the Bible are fearsome, always telling the people to whom they appear "Don't be afraid."

So when I think of angels ministering to Jesus, I don't think of ethereal creatures in flowing robes and wispy wings offering him soup and cups of tea. I think of burly warriors surrounding Jesus after his ordeal is over, offering him cool water and listening ears.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. We are starting a forty-day season in the wilderness. Can you feel the Holy Spirit driving you into this season? How are you being tested? Are you encountering beasts or animals? And who are your angels—or how can you be a powerful angel to someone else?