

Angels in the Wilderness

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Rev. Frank Allen

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

## THE WILDERNESS

The first 13 verses of Mark take place in the wilderness.

First, Mark quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah. This passage is about the mysterious messenger who prepares the way of the Lord. He is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness."

And then right on cue John the Baptist appears and preaches in the wilderness. John's message is about radical change. He tells the people it's time to get cleaned up and go in a new direction. There's a new world coming, and they need to get ready.

John sounds like some sort of strange street preacher to us, yelling at the top of his lungs about the apocalypse to come.

But, the people who first heard John preach didn't hear it that way. They heard John's preaching as a fulfillment of prophecy and a word of hope.

And that's why everyone in Jerusalem and the surrounding area made their way into the desert to hear John preach and be baptized.

John told the people that he was not the Messiah. One much more powerful than him was on the way.

And then Jesus comes to the wilderness of Jordan.

### NOBODY NOTICES BUT GOD

But, Jesus doesn't come from Jerusalem or Judea. Jesus comes from Nazareth of Galilee. In Mark's gospel no one notices this man who comes from Nazareth. (Nothing good comes from Nazareth you know. At least that's what the people said.)

So, nobody notices.

John doesn't notice Jesus. The crowds don't notice Jesus. In Mark's gospel, Jesus just comes and is one of many who is baptized.

But, God does notice.

The Bible tells us that the skies are ripped open. The veil between heaven and earth is rent. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. And a voice from heaven proclaims,

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

### BAPTIZED INTO DEATH

This is a very dramatic and powerful scene. But, what does it mean? Why was Jesus baptized? And why is God so pleased with the baptism of his Son?

Jesus was not baptized to wash away his sin. Jesus was without sin.

Jesus waded into the muddy waters of the Jordan to take the sins of the world upon himself. His baptism symbolized submission and sacrifice. It was an act of courage.

And this was what pleased the Father.

One preacher recalled the days when he was trying to get his life-saving merit badge in the Boy Scouts. He said that there was one thing that they drilled into him from the very beginning. If you can possibly avoid it, don't get in the water with a person who is drowning.

Many of you know why that's true. A person who is about to go down for the third time is desperate. He or she will grab onto anything in an effort to get on top of the water. And that includes the swimmer who is trying to save them.

A savior can be drowned by the person he or she is trying to save.

So, if someone is in trouble you throw them a life preserver. Or, extend a pole and try to pull them to safety.

Only as a last resort do you get in the pool with them. You can lose your life trying to save a fearful and desperate person.

But, in the baptism of Jesus we see that this is exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus came to the wilderness, our wilderness. And he got down into the churning muddy waters with us in order to save us.

This was not only a dangerous move. This was a deadly move. It was an action that would eventually lead to the cross. Jesus would be pulled under the water by the very people he came to save.

His baptism into the Jordan was a baptism into death.

Now you might ask, "Why did he do it? Didn't Jesus know that it was a dangerous move? Why didn't Jesus try some other way?"

We actually hear Jesus ask that question of his heavenly Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked, "Is there any other way?"

But, there wasn't, and Jesus accepted that. God's people had refused to be saved when God reached down to them from upon high. So God sent His Son into the world to save the world.

God's Son took the risky step of getting down into the muddy water with a sinful people.

## THE WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATION

And where did that lead? It led to divine affirmation. The voice from heaven did say that Jesus was the Beloved Son. But, it also lead to an even more intense wilderness experience and temptation.

Once again I think that it's hard to get the flavor of Mark's gospel from an English translation. In the Greek there is a sense of power and even violence.

When Jesus is baptized the heavens are ripped open, the Holy Spirit lands upon Jesus like a dove. But, this dove has talons. The voice of affirmation is followed immediately by the Spirit casting Jesus out into the wilderness of temptation.

The baptism of Jesus started a spiritual war.

Mark's gospel may give us less detail when it comes to the temptation, but the language of Mark makes the importance of the temptation clear. For forty days the battle rages as Jesus is in the wilderness facing temptation by Satan. The wild animals represent the dangers and the fears that surround Jesus.

But, Jesus is not alone in the wilderness. He is also surrounded and served by the angels.

For us this cosmic battle between good and evil is quite different from our day to day struggles. Jesus in the wilderness is a far cry from the way we are tested, or so it seems. But, maybe not.

In the book of Hebrews (4:15) we learn that maybe the testing of Jesus was not so far from our our times of testing. The Bible tells us that Jesus, our great high priest is able to sympathize with us. Why?

Because he was tempted in every way, tested in every way, just as we are.

The temptation of Jesus is described in powerful, cosmic terms in Mark's gospel. And that's an accurate description. The baptism and temptation of Jesus are a kind of summary of the gospel writ large. It is the beginning of the final battle between good and evil.

And yet this story is also our story. The battle of temptation in the wilderness continues in many different places and in many different ways. The hymn that we sang this morning (Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley) tells the truth. Jesus had to walk the lonesome valley and so do we.

### NOT ALONE

On the other hand, I have to question the message of that hymn. The hymn suggests that we have to walk that lonesome valley by ourself? Is that true?

Do we have to take that walk that valley by ourself?

Sometimes it may seem that we walk the lonesome valley by ourselves. Indeed, when Jesus was on the cross, even he felt forsaken, abandoned by his heavenly Father. But, in the final analysis we do not face temptation alone.

When Jesus was in the wilderness facing the perils of the wild animals and the temptation of Satan, he was not by himself. The angels, the messengers of God were with him.

And just as the angels were with Jesus in his time of trial, the Spirit of God in Christ is with us in our time of trial. Jesus understands, Jesus sympathizes with our temptation because he too was tempted in every way.

### ASHES IMPOSED

Notice that even Jesus didn't volunteer for the wilderness of temptation. He was driven into that wilderness by the Spirit. Jesus, like us asked for some other way. Jesus, like us struggled in the wilderness.

And eventually, the wild animals of the wilderness will overcome him and nail him to a cross.

That's what the 40 days of Lent are all about. We are on that road with Jesus again, the road to the cross. Lent is a time for humility and facing the hard facts of life.

A friend led an Ash Wednesday service this past week. The turnout for Ash Wednesday services are not usually very good, but she was pleased that 50 people showed up for the service. She wrote in an email,

"Elders were pleased with the turnout. I was too. I'll take more than one third of the congregation on a cold dark night for ashes on their heads!"

Ashes, of course are a symbol of repentance and so a fitting way to start the season of Lent. In the Old Testament the folks at Nineveh respond to the preaching of Jonah with repentance. That's why they don sackcloth and cover themselves with ashes.

Ashes also symbolize the fragility of life. God told Adam, "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." We know that, but we don't want to talk about it. In Lent we force ourselves to talk about it.

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy we talk about the "imposition of ashes." Most of the time the only way we'll have ashes is to have them imposed on us. We don't want anything to do with the wilderness unless we are driven there.

And yet, maybe we can use these 40 days of Lent to look at the wilderness in a different way.

We have to be very careful here. The wilderness is still the wilderness. It is not a resort.

It is still the place of temptation and wild animals who bring out our deepest fears. The wilderness is the domain of Satan, the father of all lies, the one who opposes the kingdom of God.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WILDERNESS

But, there is another side to the wilderness.

The Spirit is also in the wilderness. The wilderness is that place where angels can minister to us. The wilderness is the place where there is a new creation.

In the wilderness the kingdom of God can come near. It is in the wilderness that God builds a highway to the new Jerusalem.

The struggle of the wilderness is inevitable. We will all face the wilderness in one way or another. Yet, in the wilderness we might look at the struggles around us and ask,

“Even though I didn’t want this, could God be at work in my life during this difficult time?”

The Bible tells us that God’s people were formed in the wilderness. For example, after the Exodus from Egypt, it was in the wilderness that God’s people received the law and were fed the bread from heaven.

Ironically, in the wilderness the Israelites felt closer to God than at any other time in their history.

The wilderness was a place of great struggle. But, the wilderness was also a place where faith was formed and covenants were forged. And I believe God is still in the business of wringing resurrection out of the wilderness, that place of temptation and death.

The Spirit hurled Jesus into an epic battle between good and evil in the wilderness. And I wonder if the Spirit might do the same with us.

## LOOKING BEYOND THE WILDERNESS

To follow Jesus means to join the struggle for peace and justice in a world bent on fear and destruction. Since we live on this side of the

cross we can rest assured that God in Christ will eventually win the victory.

But, on the other hand, sometimes in the middle of our battle it doesn't seem so sure. We are tempted to give up, to succumb to the wild beasts of the wilderness. We are tempted to join in the cries of despair and hopelessness.

We must remember that the wilderness will not last forever.

There will come a time when we will cross over into the Promised Land. There will come a time when we will find that the tomb is empty. There will come a time when the Spirit will fill us and enable us to speak God's word with boldness.

But, until that time, we walk with Jesus on the way to the cross. That's what Lent is all about. During Lent we enter the wilderness with Jesus. We dare to face our greatest temptations. We acknowledge that there are wild beasts at the door.

But, in the wilderness we are also fed the bread of life. Angels minister to us. And we catch a vision of the kingdom that comes near. When we come out of our wilderness we can begin to preach the gospel in a new and powerful way.

## TEMPTED BY LONLINESS

Mark doesn't list any specific temptations like the other gospels, Matthew and Luke. Mark just says that Jesus was tempted.

I don't know what tempted Jesus, but I do know what tempts us. We are tempted to believe that it doesn't matter, that God is not with us in our wilderness. We're tempted to believe that we're all alone, that its all up to us.

That's not only a lie; its a dammed lie, the temptation of Satan.

I've been thinking about what my friend said about those 50 people who came out on a cold night to have ashes put on their heads.

Why would they do a thing like that? And why would we want to take yet another journey with Jesus on the road to the cross?

Maybe we do it because we need to do it.

We need to be reminded that God is still with us in the wilderness, our wilderness. We need to be reminded that even the ashes of life will not have the last word, that in life and in death we belong to God.

A minister told of preaching a sermon about God's grace and God's love for us. After the sermon a young woman told the preacher,

"Those were beautiful words. But, I don't think you'd say them if your really knew me."

The pastor said that the ache in those words stayed with him still. And he asked,

"How many people wonder the same thing? Could God really love us if God knew just how broken and at times dark our lives can be?"

The answer is yes.

God can and does love us. No matter what wilderness we find ourselves in today God in Christ has been there and is still there. Jesus meets us in our wilderness to bear our burdens for us and with us.

## ANGEL INVENTORY

Most of us think of Lent as a time to give up something or repent for those things that we have done wrong. In the words of those 12 step programs Lent is a time to "do a fearless moral inventory." Maybe.

But, one pastor suggested a different discipline for Lent. She suggested that take inventory of the angels who have loved us and cared for us when we were in the wilderness.

She went on to say that we'll have to expand our definition of angels. Messengers of God don't always have to come with long white robes and dazzling halos. Indeed most of the time the angels in our life look pretty plain.

And then she gave an example. It was a story about her friend Bill.

In 1964, when Bill was only 14, his dad was committed to the state mental hospital. In those days nobody talked about such things. The family story was simply that his father was away on business.

Bill suffered silently and alone.

No one knew about his father except one family friend, Bill's 4-H teacher, Mr. Moore. Though Mr. Moore never talked about his dad it somehow made Bill feel better that at least one person knew the truth.

The week before his dad's birthday Bill's mom told him she wanted him to go with her to the state hospital for the day. Bill was terrified, and he didn't want to go. Bill and his mom fought over this for the next few days and finally his mom asked Bill if it would help to have someone else go along.

Bill immediately thought of Mr. Moore. His 4-H leader agreed. It was still a scary trip, but Bill said that the presence of his teacher made all the difference.

"He knew what to say and do. He simply gave my dad a big hug and teased him about getting old. He shared stories about all the funny things he and my dad had done together. He got him to ask me and my sisters about our 4-H projects and school.

We stayed until visiting hours were over. It was actually hard to leave, which surprised me since I'd dreaded it so much. But as we walked out, I realized I was no longer afraid.

Having Mr. Moore there made it seem normal, like we were all around the kitchen table at home and not in the visitors' room at the

state hospital. He made us feel normal, too. That my dad was still my dad, even if he was dealing with a mental illness.”

Bill said, “Mr. Moore wasn't anyone special. He wasn't trained in psychiatry or pastoral counseling. He was a just a friend who was willing to walk through those hospital gates with us and sit and eat birthday cake and talk with my dad.”

Do you have a story about an angel who walked with you in the wilderness?

Maybe you're in the wilderness right now and maybe you feel all alone. Maybe there's an angel nearby who can remind you that God is still with you, walking with you during this difficult time. Maybe there's an angel nearby that can remind you that the time in the wilderness will not last forever.

One thing I do know. God has come near to us in Christ Jesus. And He's with us now and forever.

Don't succumb to temptation. Don't think that God is absent even in the most god forsaken place.

It's just not true.

During Lent Jesus tells us, “Walk with me. The road will eventually lead out of the wilderness and to an empty tomb.”

Amen.