

February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent
Mark 1:9-15

THE BEASTS IN OUR WILDERNESS

Reading this story reminds me of a conversation I had in my office several years ago with a woman who had asked to stop by and tell me about her faith-based organization. I honestly can't remember what their mission focus was, but she was a paid, full-time Director. She was one of those people who has found her calling and is grateful to be in full-time ministry. It was a pleasant and enjoyable conversation, but as we were wrapping up, she said something like: with all the troubles in the church these days due to clergy misconduct, we always say extra prayers for you pastors, the devil is always working on you the hardest. I was a little taken aback. I should have just said well thank you. I am grateful for prayers any time, any place. But in one of my all-too-common lapses of tact, I said "well we're responsible for our own choices just like anyone else." She looked a little surprised and disappointed. Oh well.

In Mark's version of the temptation of Jesus, we don't get the long, drawn out debate between him and the Devil that Matthew and Luke report. They apparently felt the need to elaborate where Mark, in typical fashion, did not.

Mark uses the word "immediately" 26 times in the first 11 chapters to describe the events in Jesus' ministry before the beginning of the Passion story. Everything in Mark, leading up to the cross is urgent and intense. No time to fool around with long, entertaining tales about conversations with the devil.

In 6 short verses, we hear about Jesus' first public appearance when he is baptized by John, affirmed by the voice of God as his Son, and filled with the Holy Spirit. Then he is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days where he is tempted by Satan. And he is with the wild beasts and he is waited on by angels.

For all the press that the devil gets, it surprises most people how few Biblical references to him there are. In a Wednesday night study not too long ago, we were talking about Satan and someone asked whether Satan was a fallen angel. That is certainly a tradition of the church, depicted in many paintings by Medieval and Renaissance artists, but there really isn't much Biblical support for it. A brief reference in Revelation to Satan's Angels and a similar passage in the Book of Daniel are about it

I guess the Devil is just an easy scape goat. How many of you over 55 are sitting there remembering Flip Wilson, cross-dressing as Geraldine the sassy flamboyant character who would talk about her escapades and say "the Devil made me do it." But there are a lot of people who are very serious about "the work of the Devil." I get a little uneasy whenever someone starts talking about how the devil does this or Satan does that. As funny as Flip Wilson was, we need to be alert and wary, of any suggestion that bad behavior might be excusable because the person doing the bad behavior has been a special target of the Devil who somehow caused the circumstances that led to the bad behavior.

What we do know about the devil from Scripture is that he really doesn't do much. I know, you've got the first two chapters of Job that are really hard to figure out. And it is only two chapters out of 22. But those are the two chapters everyone remembers. Even there, it isn't like the Satan is putting ideas into anyone's head or doing anything that might be construed as causing someone to sin. There isn't anything that would support the idea that the devil makes anybody do anything or tries to prevent people from doing the right thing.

Maybe that is why Mark's version of the temptation of Christ doesn't make Satan a central figure. This is the entire story according to Mark: ¹²

The important character here is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness after his baptism. This is not a laid back, sweet

Spirit. This is a Spirit on the move, with a mission. And Jesus obeys, going where the Spirit sends him.

In these few sentences, Mark reminds us of other wilderness stories. The wilderness is always a testing place. When the waters of the Jordan fell back over the Egyptian army the children of God danced and sang their praise songs in the wilderness, but only for a short while. Immediately as Mark would say, the reality of the wilderness started to sink in. No food. No water. In the wilderness, they were entirely dependent on God for their very lives.

The wilderness is the domain of Satan to be sure. And so, in this short urgent story is a snap chat text of Jesus' entire earthly experience. He moves into the wilderness of Satan, this world. But even there we see the snap shots where the wild beasts do not devour him and the angels wait on him. The power of the Spirit calls us into the wilderness as well and that same power enables us to see new life there.

The wilderness is anyplace where the teaching of Jesus sounds foolish and the voices of the rest of the world sound reasonable. The wilderness is any place where the teachings of Jesus sound impractical and the ways of the rest of the world sound pragmatic. Jesus says welcome the children. The world says send them away if they didn't get here legally. Jesus says feed the hungry, care for the sick. The world says that costs too much.

Every wilderness has its wild beasts. The beasts in our wilderness today are many: politicians who refuse to disturb the beast that rants against any effort to place safeguards on the sale of guns. The beast of unchecked and untreated mental illness. The beast of mass murder of children in their school. These are the wild beasts of our wilderness. We must meet them where they are. We can't cave into them. We, who are Spiritually well fed have also been driven by the Spirit. We are tempted to hide from the beasts, or worse feed them in hopes they'll leave us alone,

but by the same Spirit we are empowered to transform the wilderness into the kingdom.

That's what Jesus did. That is what he calls us to do.