

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; ^[a]with you I am well pleased."

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.^[a] ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹²God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." ¹⁷God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

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“Wild Beasts and Angels”

Mark 1:9-15; Genesis 9:8-17

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As I often plan out my sermon from home, it may help you to know that when I’m doing that, I’m often surrounded by wild beasts. There are the two I live with – a loveable mutt of a dog, and a tiny black furball of a cat who like to make my day interesting with their chasing games and wanting attention. Then I may hear the sound of birds outside – crows and hawks that argue about nesting grounds right above where my car is parked. Or I see the squirrels from the back deck as they chase each other up and down the trees, chattering away as they go. If I go for a walk to gather my thoughts – there are inevitably more creatures down by the lake. This is the time of year when the seagulls come inland and make their home on Swift Creek Reservoir. Their constant squawking makes it sound like I’m at the ocean when I’ve only walked across the main Parkway in my subdivision. Later in the spring, I’ll notice the geese and ducks protecting their young and guiding them to new adventures, and then the spring peepers will start to make their sounds that it’s time for winter to be gone for good. Even in the suburban sprawl of Brandermill, or the backyards of Ashland, or the woods around Hanover county, there are creatures all around us. We don’t really escape nature – even when we are in the midst of the city – and I wouldn’t want to even if I could.

Clearly, we aren’t the only creatures on this planet. We aren’t even the most numerous creatures on this planet, and you could make the case that we aren’t even the smartest given the kind of stupid things that humans are known to do to themselves. Though we claim that humans, like us, are the ones created in God’s image, God loves the whole world, and with it every corner

of creation, even the corners where human life wouldn't be either pleasurable or sustainable. The covenant promise reaffirmed with Noah after the flood ended and they found themselves on dry land went beyond the promise of multitudes of descendants for humankind first addressed with Abraham. Now, the covenant would be kept with all of creation and include every living creature – those pairs of cattle and sheep, doves and ravens, porcupines and alligators that came out of the ark received the same blessing as you and me, that God would not be enraged enough to wipe out the world with a flood ever again. The rainbow is a symbol of that promise, a reminder that God is always FOR life, for abundance, for diversity, and for every, EVERY living thing. All flesh can count on God's promises to be kept – forever.

Though our taxonomies of creatures have become more sophisticated since then and you could ponder the question if mosquitoes are loved just as much by God as adorable miniature goats, I think that this all means all. All creatures. All plants. All rivers and oceans. All rocks and mountains. Got it. All creation is gift of the Creator. And God, the Creator, promises in this case not to be the destroyer. At least not by flood. And that means that the dolphins have it way over humans anyway. No flood is going to ruin their day.

The creatures matter – to God. And I happen to think that it's pretty cool to have them around.

Apparently, so did the gospel writer Mark. Mark's temptation story is altogether different from the story we get in Matthew and Luke. For one thing, it's just a sentence. Good old Mark. He doesn't want to overwhelm us with unnecessary details. The other two gospel writers, you may recall, tell the story of Jesus, hungry and alone, being tempted by Satan three different times. It's a good story – one we should tell, and we'll do that in another Lent. John leaves out having a temptation story altogether though Jesus seems to be in constant spiritual conflict in that

book. But Mark chooses to say just this, “Jesus was in the wilderness, forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

I have no idea what kind of image that conjures up for you. But I find the details that Mark picks to include fascinating. What was it like for Jesus to be sent out into the wilderness? Well, for one thing, it was wild. Right. When you go out into the wilderness, there’s an expectation that that’s where the wild animals are – everything from the small and defenseless to the large and threatening. What kind of animals do you imagine hanging around with Jesus? Did he have a trustworthy dog by his side? Did mice and birds scurry around him? Did ferocious beasts stop baring their teeth to feel his peacefulness, or did the vultures circle around his weak and tired body? Of course, we don’t really know, but I like to think that Jesus was not frightened by the created world, rather he was comforted by it. After all, many spiritual writers and commentators have talked about the universe as God’s great book – as a partner to the Bible and just as much a revelation of God’s character and purpose as anything we can find in scripture. Meister Eckhart says this about the creatures themselves, “Anyone who truly knows creatures may be excused from listening to sermons for every creature is full of God, and is a book.” (www.bookofnature.org/library/ngb.html) So, next time I preach a particularly dull sermon, feel free to go home and spend time with your pets or out bird watching and know that God has a multitude of ways to get our attention and that there are messages from God happening all around you.

Now that I’ve spent some time nudging your imagination to think about the scope of creation and how Jesus finds himself in the company of wild beasts, we get to the second part of Mark’s description, that angels waited on him. I have never done an official fast, nor really even stuck to a diet if I’m being really honest. And I’ve not spent 40 days in fasting and seclusion

such that I would reach the physical and emotional limits of hunger and being alone. But I know that those who undertake the kind of spiritual quest that Mark is describing experience both great visions and desperate temptations, and in most instances, they come out on the other side of their experience having done the kind of soul work that is life changing for the better. Having read some of the writings of the desert mothers and fathers who tried to live this wilderness life – you get some pretty strange stuff coming out of their observations. Some of it truly sounds like they met God. Other observations seem to be more easily attributed to how the brain changes when the body is undergoing significant trauma. Jesus, however, didn't try to live this way. Rather he has an experience like this one time, for a biblically significant number of days – 40 – and then he chooses to live his life in abundance rather than in scarcity. His life feels full afterward rather than it seeming like he always needs more or should be punishing himself to have less. So, what happened to him out there?

If we didn't have Matthew and Luke filling in the details for us about what Satan wants to offer Jesus, if we only had Mark's sentence to go on, as he is being tempted, Jesus is tended to by angels. On this quest, Jesus is alone, but not alone. He must persevere on his own – but the wild beasts and angels provide glimpses of God's sustaining love. Do these attendant angels wash his feet and comb his hair? Do they hold him in the coldest part of the night? Do they hover over him like ghosts from beyond? Again – it would be meaningful to spend some time in personal meditation imagining just this line from Mark. How do you see Jesus being guided and guarded in his holy quest?

I like that Mark leaves it up to us to picture the details for ourselves. I like it because it's like remembering a dream. We can picture ourselves in the scene with Jesus, and the details that come to us are like our own messages from God. They tell us about who we think he is and how

we think he was known and loved by God. What animals show up? How do the surroundings look and smell? What do you observe the angels doing? This prayerful imagining, which is a practice more fully described in the writings of Saint Ignatius, can allow us a greater imagination to walk the paths of our own spiritual journeys. So, when the heron flies by me at just the right moment, I don't hesitate to allow that to be more than just coincidental. And when a person tells me just the right thing at just the right moment, I know I'm being tended to by angels – which can also just be another word for the messengers of God. The natural world and the kindness of others are God's guideposts for the whole of the spiritual life, not just for those who go on their own vision-quests. Allow the wild beasts and angels to look after you. Amen.