

Angels in the Wilderness

Meditation on Mark 1:9-

Feb. 18, 2018

First Sunday in Lent

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

9 In 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; 'with you I am well pleased.' ¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for 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, ¹⁵and saying, ' 'The time is fulfilled, 'and the kingdom of God has come near; 'repent, and believe in the good news.'

They sang about two birds on a hill. One named Jack. One named Jill. Fly away Jack. Fly away Jill. Come back, Jack. Come back, Jill! Then they were teapots. "Tip me over and pour me out!"

Our Tuesday morning chapel with the 3, 4 and 5 year olds was the highpoint of my week. We finished our month-long study of Joseph with motion songs and prayer. Then teachers and other staff and volunteers from the church joined with me to lead the children to make "Joseph

coat” crafts, with grocery bags, paper plates, and color by number sheets. We even made Joseph puppets on tongue depressor sticks. I was so blessed on Tuesday with the children and all those who wanted to teach them about God’s love and faithfulness. It felt as if angels were all around!

The children learned through drama, storytelling and crafts how Joseph suffered many challenges and dark days--his own brothers’ stealing the special coat that was a symbol of his father’s love. They throw him in a pit and leave him for dead. Then Joseph is sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. While there, though he serves his master faithfully, he is falsely accused of a crime and thrown into jail where he languishes for years in another kind of wilderness. But it is all part of God’s plan to move him into a position where he can interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, with his God-given gift. He warns of years of great famine to come. He saves the lives of thousands, including his own brothers, who come to Egypt for help. And Joseph, with God’s gift of mercy and grace, is able to forgive his brothers, saying in Genesis 50:20,

“²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve the lives of many people, as he is doing today.”

The wilderness is a place of suffering and testing for Joseph--and for Jesus in our gospel in the first chapter in Mark today. Jesus goes to the wilderness to be baptized in the Jordan by John. Like the account in Luke and unlike the baptism in Matthew and John, the voice that speaks,

speaks directly to Jesus, assuring Jesus of his relationship to God the Father, who says, “**You** are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Christ’s identity as the Son is declared from the opening first verse of the book of Mark, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” His identity is proclaimed at his Transfiguration on the mountaintop, and finally, at the cross, when a centurion watches him die, and says, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

What follows the baptism is the Greek word for “immediately” -- *euthys*-- the first occurrence of one of Mark’s favorite words. He uses *euthys* 41 times, while the word is only found 10 other times in the entire New Testament. You won’t be able to count the 41 uses of *euthys* - in the English text of Mark because translators have used other synonyms or phrases to avoid Mark’s constant repetition of the same word.

But this actually takes away from that sense of speed, urgency and movement that Mark is trying to convey. Jesus is *immediately driven* by the Spirit into the wilderness. The strong verb for *driven* will be used again when Jesus *drives* or casts out evil spirits from the possessed. Jesus is already in the wilderness for the baptism, but now he is in the wilderness, deeper still. He is separated from all human beings. This is no refreshing retreat, no sweet time with God. It is the opposite--a time when he feels far from God as he is “tempted” by Satan. This is usually when temptation comes--when we feel separated from the Lord. These 40 days are a test to prepare him for his ministry and to show us how to withstand temptation and trials. Hebrew 4:15 tells us, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,

but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

These 40 days take us back to Noah’s ark in Genesis, when water covered the earth. The frightening, wilderness experience leads to God’s covenant with every living creature, and the sign of God’s promise never to destroy all flesh on earth again--a rainbow.

The 40 days take us back to the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:8, who was fed with bread from heaven, but then journeyed through the wilderness without any food for 40 days to the mountain of God.

Christ’s 40 days of testing take us back to the Israelites’ exodus from captivity in Egypt to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. The wilderness is a dangerous place for the Israelites and Jesus, who are with “wild beasts.” Deut. 8:15 says, “He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions.” Christ’s testing moves us forward to “a new Exodus, a new way of salvation,” a gracious gift from the same loving God who never leaves the Israelites, though they feel abandoned. In Exodus 17:7, they ask Moses, “Is the Lord among us--or not?” After experiencing the parting of the Red Sea and God feeding them with manna and quail, they still complain bitterly to Moses in Exodus 17:3, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” God responds with gracious provision in 17:6-7, causing water to come from a rock so that all may drink.

Absent from Mark’s account of Jesus’ testing is his fasting and the dialogue with Satan we remember from Matthew and Luke, beginning when Satan says, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to

become loaves of bread.”

Jesus answers Satan’s tests with God’s Word, as we should. “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus says. And, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

What touches my heart in this brief, swiftly moving passage that starts with baptism and ends with Christ’s proclamation that the Kingdom of God has come near, is when Satan leaves and a weary Jesus is waited on-- by the angels. You may not imagine angels as anything more than God’s messengers. Eternal beings, yet created by God, they were present when God created the world. In Job 38, the Lord answers Job out of a storm, saying, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? ... while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” While only 3 angels are named in the Bible -- Gabriel, Michael and Satan, the fallen angel, angels are too numerous to count. Hebrews 12:22 speaks of “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” in the heavenly Jerusalem of Mount Zion. Angels, in obedience to God, protect us from harm. Psalm 91:11-12 says, “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

What is meant by the angels “waiting on” Jesus in our Mark passage? The Greek word is *diakonein*; from which comes our word “deacon.” Bible scholar Joel Marcus says *diakonein* describes “the waiter’s task of supplying someone with food and drink,” though the word comes to mean ‘to serve’ more generally.

It makes me feel good to know that Jesus, whom God made a little lower than the angels when he emptied himself and took on our fragile

human form, needed help from heavenly beings in the wilderness. And the angels were all around.

Friends, we have begun our 40 days of Lent, a season when we seek to know God more and grow in love and grace. We scrutinize our overly busy routines and start carving away what we don't really need to do. Come on, you know you are doing too much! As Jesus says to his friend, Martha, who demanded that Mary help her in the kitchen when Jesus came over for dinner, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one." Let us carve out times of quiet devotion, delightful moments with the Lord and His people. Let us also add on time to bless and serve--to minister like the angels that were with Jesus in the wilderness. And the angels that are always with me, especially during our preschool chapel. I am sure there are things you have wanted to do for the Lord, but you say that you don't have time or energy to do them. Why not?

We live in a wilderness, now. The time between the resurrection and the fullness of God's Reign. A time of joy and abundance, resting in God's promises and steadfast love. But also a time of testing, hardship, and suffering. The good news is that the wilderness, as Israel discovered long ago, is **where God is**. For all our needs, for everything, we can trust Him. And his angels all around.

Let us pray.

Holy One, we thank you for sending your Son, who experienced all the temptations and suffering that human beings can possibly experience, and yet did not sin. Come to us now in our wilderness journeys. Heal us body, mind and soul. For those who feel as if you are far from them, make your presence known. For those who feel you with them, reassure them of your love. Thank you for your angels all around us, protecting us from harm, at your command. Draw near to us, Lord, as we seek to draw closer to you throughout this Holy Season of Lent and beyond. Show us how we might change our routines so that we do only the things that you want us to do. Help us carve away the excess busy tasks and carve out more sweet, peaceful, healing time with you. Nourish us with your Word and Spirit. Stir us to bless and serve one another and reach out with your love and grace to children of all ages. Let us wait on them as if we are the angels who restored Jesus when he was weary in the wilderness. In Christ we pray.