

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Angels and Beasts

Mark 1

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In our Gospel reading on this first Sunday in Lent, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. Few people choose this kind of experience. Wilderness was not a recreational playground or a nature preserve. It was what was out there, out beyond where humans belonged. They thought the world had three kinds of places. Our land under our God's divine protection. Your land under presumably your deity's rule. And wilderness, the vast places in-between. The unmarked places on the map. No man's land in every sense of the word.

Jesus was driven there. It's a violent term, forceful. The Spirit drives him into the wilderness. Nowhere does Mark tell us how he feels about this, being driven into the wilderness, by God's spirit no less. We're not told whether or how much he resisted being driven into the wilderness. All we're told is that The Spirit drove him into a place beyond human constructs, society, all of the scaffolding people take for granted to sustain their lives. After his baptism and the Father's loving affirmation, He was pushed into a place where, as a human fully in the flesh, he was vulnerable and powerless.

That's no man's land. Between here and there, between the past and future. Between faith and hope. Wilderness is hunger, thirst, uncertainty, loneliness, vulnerability. For many, it is despair.

I suspect you may feel like you know a little something more about wilderness after this week. You know about it because this has been a week of powerless vulnerability for a lot of us around here. Set aside jokes about how Texans can't drive in the snow and can't handle a little cold. This was no joke, and it wasn't just the extreme weather. The cascading failures of the infrastructure of modern life put people not only in serious discomfort but in real danger.

We were driven into a certain kind of wilderness. Wilderness can come in all forms: a temporary collapse of modern life for us, a fathomless flood for Noah, an endless wandering for the people of Israel after Egypt, a lonely desert for Jesus. It's a place in every case of being vulnerable.

Yesterday's warm sunshine after the snow was like a rainbow in the sky after the flood. Yet as the sun shines again over the frozen tundra, it's not a rainbow that we see here on the 1st Sunday in Lent but a straight path leading us onward from here, onward to the cross of Christ. It is Jesus's sojourn in the wilderness that gives shape to the 40-day season of Lent Christians begin this week as preparation for Holy Week and Easter.

After what we've just been through it seems a little unfair that we're just now beginning Lent. I was ready for some Easter this morning, weren't you? But our spiritual journey is not done. We are just beginning and the path is set before us.

Mark's Gospel is that straight path. Mark has been described as a crucifixion story with a long introduction. Dramatically early in that long introduction, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days where he is with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to him.

In the vulnerable place, he is met there by friend and foe. Angels ministered to him; they served him. Later in the Gospel, he will describe his own purpose with the same verb: The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Early in his ministry, in his time of need, the angels are showing him how.

But they are not the only ones there. This is no vacation. Wild beasts are there, too. The phrase 'wild beasts' doesn't appear much in Scripture. Just this one time in all four Gospels and then here and there throughout the New Testament. But then 30 times in Revelation. By the time we get to the apocolyps, evil, dangerous, snarling, destructive beings are called wild beasts. They will kill you.

Jesus is in the wilderness, but he's not alone. He is with wild beasts and the angels.

Mark sees Jesus vulnerable, alone, powerless, the embodiment of the human condition. When any person or a community is most vulnerable, be assured that two kinds of creatures will be somewhere nearby: wild beasts and angels--or as we know them, predators and helpers.

We see this all around. Where people are financially vulnerable, you'll find predatory payday lenders and soup kitchens staffed with faithful volunteers. Where people are physically vulnerable, you'll find drug dealers and community health clinics. Where people are emotionally vulnerable, you'll find conspiracy theories and compassionate counselors. Predators and angels flock to vulnerable people.

We've seen this play out here in this winter storm nightmare. We've seen predators and helpers. Predators spew false information about water shortages which then creates an actual water shortage. Predators create false narratives about the causes for the crisis, head faking the actual issues. Predators take advantage of the vulnerability of other people. What really bothers me is not the advantage the predators might get but the suffering of the most vulnerable. Predators prey on vulnerable people when they are most vulnerable. It never satiates their appetite to diminish, hurt, and take advantage of people when what they need is a neighbor, a friend, or just someone to be human to them in a time of need. We've seen some predators.

But we've seen a lot more helpers. Helpers show up. They offer what they have; they look for ways to help. They are willing to bear your suffering so yours is a little lighter. They seek to know the truth and speak the truth. And they love with their words and their hands and their feet. The angels ministered to Jesus, they served him. Helpers are ministers, servants in the way of Christ to suffering friends, neighbors, and communities.

And oh, there are angels all around. We've had offers come in from churches as far away as North Carolina to help out. There are people driving around town handing out firewood to those without electricity, and businesses passing out water bottles to those without water. Grocery stores opening even for a few hours in the afternoon and then giveaway food. Households shoveling snow into bathtubs to save a few gallons of water for a community under water restrictions. Churches here in town opened their doors to anyone cold and hungry where they were met by smiling faces and a warm meal. Neighbors shared what meager provisions they had with friends, not only navigating the trials of this storm but also the pandemic. Let's not forget that added problem.

How many offers to help, host, feed, share have we seen this week. Open hearts lead to open hands, and they've been open all week. Angels all around.

A friend of mine who has seen his share of disasters says this:

We often hear that disasters bring out the best and the worst in people. That's not quite accurate. Disasters actually reveal who people really are.

Angry people get angry.

Joyful people spread joy.

Greedy people get greedy.

Generous people give generously.

Self-centered people think it's all about them.

Compassionate people help others.

Of course, we're all a big mix of a lot of all of these things, aren't we? It's like the testing of the wilderness experience reveals who we are before we were driven there. Who we are comes out, and when we look back, we might examine ourselves and ask the question, "What came out of me during that? How did God work through me, and where does God need to work on me?" And usually . . . well, it's complicated. I tend generally to think this is true of most people. People are not all angels, and they are not all demons.

I know that purity of heart is virtue that only a rare few attain, but I don't think I subscribe very well to the doctrine of Total Depravity. We're more complicated than that as creatures: made in God's image but certainly fallen; in desperate need of God's saving grace while still beautifully and wonderfully made and capable of goodness. And so, I find that I'm continually surprised, that's not exactly the right word, just disappointed and angry when people show their teeth instead of their wings. And disappointed and angry when it happens in me, and shows me, yet again, just how far I have to go to be like Christ.

Wild beasts and angels are always all around. I know this. And have seen it again and again. But it takes Lent to remind me that the beasts and angels are not just out there. The snarls and the prayers, the better and worst of human nature isn't just in 'them' whoever 'they' are. They're both in me and in each of us, our better self and our worst self. And the line between the two isn't a straight line, and it's not always obvious.

A few days in a snowstorm isn't going to plumb those depths. That's going to take a spiritual journey. In the wilderness of Lent, if at no other time, we are brought face to face with our inner darkness, our own tendencies to be selfish or hateful or judgmental or fearful or anxious or rotten. Some call it the small self. That seems right. Christianity usually just calls it sin. We're brought face to face with sin—the sin of the world of which we're a part and the tragic effects of that sin on the diminishment of ourselves and others, especially the most vulnerable. And ultimately, we are brought face to face with our own personal sin. It is only because I trust that all of this leads to Easter that I can say this is good news and good for us to face, because we'd just rather not. Wild beasts are dangerous. They can kill you if you let them get too close, and they are already inside.

I believe that Jesus was like us in every way but without sin. So maybe he had to go to the desert wilderness and endure 40 days of fasting to find wild beasts to be with. You and I, we don't have to travel that far. Give us just a little test, and we hear the growls and howls of the beasts within us. Give us a little silence and a little space for introspection, prayer, and confession, and we are brought face to face with what lives inside of us. And that's what Lent is for: a renewed call to repent and believe in the good news that in Jesus Christ, we are saved, and we are being redeemed.

It's a long journey to the cross and the resurrection, and here at the beginning, Jesus is not afraid of wild beasts in the wilderness. And along the way, he's not afraid of the wild beasts when they show up as demon possessed men and as religious and political forces that challenge and confront him and try to silence him. And in the end, he's not afraid of them, even on the cross when the ministering angels withdrew for a time and let the beastly nature of evil take him and kill him.

And so, let us not be afraid either. Let us not be timid to confront the beasts that prey on the vulnerable with their lies and their greed. Let us not be slow to confront all that is within us that destroying us from within by our sin. Our work and our prayer come together in Christ's ministry in and through us. Let this long season of Lent be the new beginning of a renewed spiritual journey for all who have been through the storm and survived and found we are stronger than we realized, and we have more helpers than we thought. We are just a little less afraid of all that is around us and all that is within us and feel a little less alone.

We are a little more sure that in our wildernesses now and those to come that the ministry of the resurrected Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is with us, within us, and working through us for the healing and the redemption of the world. The journey has begun and all are invited to come and join the walk to Calvary.