

With the Wild Beasts

OT Reading: Genesis 9:8-17

Gospel: Mark 1:9-15

Lent 1

The Gospel of Mark is often illustrated with the symbol of a roaring lion. Mark's story begins abruptly with the man Jesus coming for baptism, after which - almost like a fast forward film - the story gallops through his time in the wilderness, to the beginning of his ministry. There are no birth stories and no anecdotes about his childhood - no gentle Jesus, meek and mild. We meet instead a wild untamed God who breaks into quiet complacent Israel: a life-altering, change your ways kind of force that is suddenly on the loose and running amok throughout the countryside.

The wilderness experience, which we heard about today, is dealt with in two sentences: First the Spirit, which a moment before had declared Jesus to be his beloved Son *drives* him into the wilderness. He remains there for forty days, as Satan tempts him, angels wait on him and wild beasts keep him company.

The forty days of Lent are based on Jesus wilderness experience. Both the wilderness and the number 40 are symbols that occur throughout scripture, and both represent times of testing, preparation and waiting. Noah and the animals waited in the ark for forty days as the waters subsided. The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness stumbling, rebelling and longing to return to the chains of slavery. And Moses spent 40 days with God on Mount Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments. By spending forty days traveling through Lent, we remember and relive those stories.

Matthew and Luke give far more detailed accounts of Jesus' 40 days. Luke has Satan tempting Jesus throughout his time in the wilderness. Matthew has Jesus fasting for 40 days before Satan came and challenged him. But it is only Mark who adds this little detail: that Jesus was with the wild beasts.

Where else in God's story do we encounter wild beasts? In our first reading, Noah and his family, along with a lot of wild beasts have just emerged from the ark after surviving the flood which had killed every other thing that moved on the earth. Having watched the destruction, God determined never again to destroy the earth. He makes a covenant not only with the humans but also the animals. God blesses and cares for all created things.

This is not the first time God had blessed the animals. In the beginning God created and blessed every living thing and gave Adam dominion over them. It was a beautiful setting where Adam walked among the animals without fear. Unfortunately, Adam's sin led him to be ejected from Eden and

to lose control over God's animals.

Since Noah's time, animals have not have a great deal to say to humans, apart from Balaam's donkey whose mouth was opened by the Lord after Balaam beat her with a stick (Numbers 22:28-30). And as Elijah, on the run from king Ahab sat in his own wilderness, he was fed bread and meat by ravens (1Kings 17:5-6). But for the most part, animals for the Israelites were either domesticated, such as sheep and camels, or wild such as bears and leopards – to be avoided at all costs.

However, the Israelites still remembered the old stories and dreamed of the day when once again there would be no more enmity between humans and animals, when “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den” (Isaiah 11:6-8). In later years, St. Francis preached to the birds, and referred to all creatures as brothers and sisters.

Today we have Jesus in the wilderness with the wild beasts. It's not hard to see Jesus as the new Adam, naming the animals, or the new Noah, feeding and caring for them at the beginning of his ministry, perhaps giving us a foretaste of God's future when all creatures will live in peace.

From the beginning, God has been in the business of caring for all of his creation, and it is his wish that the earth, sea and air teem with creatures. We are charged with caring for them, and protecting the habitats they depend on for their survival. Jesus, our model for compassion is called the Good Shepherd, and the firstborn of every creature (Col. 1:15). He was born in a stable surrounded by animals, and his first visitors were shepherds, come to see the Lamb of God. At his baptism, The Holy Spirit descended like a dove. He took a coin from a fish's mouth to pay taxes, and he rode into Jerusalem on a colt. There's an intimate connection between Jesus and God's creatures, including the wild beasts, who were his companions in the wilderness.

There is value and wisdom in all of life. Job, speaking to his fair-weather friends put it this way: “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you; who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being” (Job 12:7-10).

Over the past few decades, we have begun to wake up to our dependence on all of God's creation, as the results of our careless exploitation have affected us all. Many species – pangolins, certain whales, bees and other insects are dangerously depleted or close to extinction. And our disregard for

animal welfare has affected our health, as diseases have been transmitted to humans from cows, pigs, poultry and now bats.

The season of lent gives us an ancient Christian practice that can help us to care for God's creation. It's the practice of fasting, or restraint. I'm not suggesting that we should all become vegans – after all, Jesus enjoyed a good feast of lamb, and he certainly ate a lot of fish. But lent is a good time to carefully consider the effect of our consumption on the rest of the world. When we sit down for a meal, in addition to thanking God for our food, we might also remember and pray for the welfare and the dignity of the earth and the creatures from which it has come.

We are part of a vast and amazing creation. We do not own the world, and we cannot live only for ourselves. We share this world with birds, fish, reptiles and all the beasts of the wilderness. Our well-being depends on the wilderness and the health of the wilderness depends on us. We live in a world of wonders. It's a world well worth keeping.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden
Benefice service during
coronavirus lockdown