

"With the Wild Beasts"

Genesis 9:8-17, 1Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

March 5, 2006

I think I shared this with you earlier but I really enjoy it and it fits. It is the story of a pastor working in an inner city was walking down an alley one evening on his way home when a young man came down the alley behind him and poked a knife against his back. "Give me your money," the young man said. The pastor turned slowly, opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket to remove his wallet. In so doing he expose his clerical collar. "Oh, I'm sorry," said the young man, "I didn't know you were a pastor. I don't want YOUR money." Being afraid and unsure what to do, the pastor pulled out a cigar that he had just received from a family with a new baby and offered it to the young man in hopes of making a connection. "Here," he said. "Have a cigar." "Oh, no, I can't do that," the young man replied, "I gave them up for Lent."

It's a jungle out there. There are a world of temptations and at the very least, if you give up cigars for Lent, don't give in to the temptation.

It is a jungle out there. Even though Mark gives us almost no details when he records the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness following His baptism, I like his account. In other Gospel accounts we get this picture of Jesus engaged in a face to face emotional and spiritual battle with Satan. In other Gospel accounts we get details of the conversation and even suggestions of locations in which the temptations play themselves out. But in Mark's Gospel we get very few details - it was 40 days [a very significant Biblical number meaning, for as long as it took to get the job done], He was being tempted by Satan, and for some reason Mark tells us that He was with the wild beasts.

I have to tell you that I have no idea why Mark adds that little detail. I am sure that most of the folks to whom Mark was writing knew very well what was out there in the wilderness. I imagine that parents in those days regularly warned their kids about the dangers of the wild animals out there. And I suspect that kids then, as today might have brushed off the advice with a, 'Ya sure mom. Like a little scorpion is really going to hurt me.' Wild beasts and the wilderness just go together. But it is a stark picture. One minute Jesus is coming up out of the Baptismal waters with a dove descending upon Him and the voice of God assuring Jesus of His love but only minutes later Jesus finds Himself in the wilderness - - - alone - - - no adoring and supportive crowds - - - just wild beasts and the voice of temptation.

So often, I want to imagine that ours is a "Courier and Ives" world. I want to think that Norman Rockwell sketched the world as it always is. I want to picture families gathered around the supper table with the golden brown turkey on the table, each

head bowed in prayer. I want to believe as I drive down the road past various farmsteads that there is smoke gently rising from the chimney and a light dusting of white snow forming a perfect base for the horse drawn sleigh in front of the house. I know that it is not a reality out there in our big old mean world. But here in Bottineau - - - here in the 'holy land' of North Dakota - - - here among the good Christians of a place blessed by God - - - at least here that must, or should be true. But then I encounter the wild beasts. The wind blows so hard that the gentle falling snow forms drifts so hard that they can not be moved, the heating bill is too high and we only wished there was a way to throw a log on the fire, there isn't time to prepare a turkey and the microwave spits out a pre-prepared meal, families are scattered and people eat alone in front of the TV. Beyond these daily realities we are all too aware of the wild beast that hound us in the wilderness of our lives - beasts of disease and depression, temptations and addictions, loneliness and fears, anger and hatred, rejection and isolation.

To me it is encouraging to see that our God understands. Jesus just leaves the waters of Baptism and the proclamation of a loving God and immediately the wild beast surround Him. But so do the angels. And they minister to Him.

I have tried to figure out why we have this Gospel text appointed for the first Sunday in Lent. In many ways it does not make sense since we have just read through the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel in the past few weeks and now we jump backwards to the baptism and temptation narratives. But I always believe that the appointed scriptures are relevant for our lives if we will only listen closely.

Lent is a season that invites us to see again that we live in a world that is darkened by sin. It invites us to turn away from the darkness and walk with our Lord even when that darkness takes us through the cross and tomb. As we walk with our Savior we will come through the darkness and to the light of a risen Christ.

Today as we are reminded of the Lenten call to repent we do so acknowledging that the wild beasts of temptation hid in the darkness of our wilderness journeys. And yet we do not simply walk through the wilderness alone. God provides angels to minister to us as well. They come in countless forms as God seeks to lift and encourage us on our journey.

I received an email that talked about what to "give up" for Lent. It became a word of encouragement for me - in some sense a message for God to lift and encourage me in the journey. Among the long list of what to give up were the following:

GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed! Instead, use that time in prayer, Bible study and personal devotion.

GIVE UP looking at other people's worst points. Instead concentrate on their best points. We all have faults. It is a lot easier to have people overlook our shortcomings when we overlook theirs first.

GIVE UP speaking unkindly. Instead, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting. Why not check that sharp tongue at the door?

GIVE UP your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, learn the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins."

GIVE UP your worries and anxieties! Instead, trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about: like tomorrow! Live today and let God's grace be sufficient.

GIVE UP TV one evening a week! Instead, visit some lonely or sick person. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Why isolate yourself in front of the "tube?" Give someone a precious gift: your time! GIVE UP judging by appearances and by the standard of the world! Instead, learn to give up yourself to God.

I know that the wild beast are out there. But I know that the angels are too. Listen for the voice of God ministering to you and encouraging you. Give up something on this list for Lent and be one of those angels ministering to others as they walk through the wilderness.

AMEN