

Mark 1:9-15
February 18, '18
Lent 1

“BEASTS & ANGELS”

OF ALL THE MOVIES THAT HAVE BEEN MADE ABOUT THE LIFE OF JESUS, PERHAPS NONE IS MORE BIZARRE THAN THE MARTIN SCORSESE FILM OF 30 YEARS AGO, “THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST.”

IT’S BASED ON THE BOOK OF THE SAME NAME BY NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS.

IF YOU REMEMBER THE MOVIE, YOU PROBABLY REMEMBER THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING IT.

ONE OF THE FASCINATING ASPECTS OF THE FILM, THOUGH, WAS ITS TREATMENT OF THIS EVENT IN MARK’S FIRST CHAPTER – THE STORY OF THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS.

SCORCESE HAS THE TEMPTATIONS APPEAR IN THE FORM OF A VIPER, A LION, A PILLAR OF FIRE & AN APPLE.

JESUS RESISTS THEM ALL & THEN PROCEEDS TO STEP INTO THE WORLD TO BEGIN HIS MINISTRY.

THAT SCENE – LIKE THE REST OF THE MOVIE – GIVES US A DIFFERENT APPROACH THAN WHAT WE ORDINARILY SEE IN FILMS ABOUT JESUS.

AS WE’VE ALREADY SAID SEVERAL TIMES OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS, MARK, TOO, OFFERS A DIFFERENT APPROACH THAN WHAT WE FIND IN THE OTHER THREE GOSPELS.

ITS MOVEMENT IS FAST & ITS CONTENT SLIM.

TODAY’S READING IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE.

IT INCLUDES THE BAPTISM OF JESUS, THE TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS & THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST ALL IN THE SPACE OF BUT 7 VERSES!

WE THINK OF THE TEMPTATION PERIOD LASTING 40 DAYS & EVEN THOUGH MARK INCLUDES THAT DETAIL, HIS ACCOUNT OF IT IS SO BRIEF THAT WE MIGHT BE LED TO CONCLUDE THAT IT LASTED, NOT 40 DAYS, BUT RATHER 40 MINUTES!

MATTHEW SPENDS 11 VERSES ON THIS STORY & LUKE DEVOTES 13, BOTH OF THEM COMPLETE WITH VARIOUS LOCATIONS & EXTENDED DIALOGUE BETWEEN JESUS & SATAN.

MARK, ON THE OTHER HAND, GIVES IT JUST 2 VERSES –
“THE SPIRIT IMMEDIATELY DROVE HIM OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS. (THERE’S THAT WORD IMMEDIATELY AGAIN IN MARK). AND HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS FORTY DAYS, TEMPTED BY SATAN; AND HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS; AND THE ANGELS MINISTERED TO HIM.”

CONSIDERING MARK’S ECONOMY OF WORDS, YOU HAVE TO FIGURE THOSE HE USES HAVE GREAT SIGNIFICANCE.

IN JUST THESE TWO VERSES, WE SEE THE WORD “WILDERNESS” APPEAR TWICE.

THAT MEANS IT’S IMPORTANT.

ACCORDING TO BOTH MATTHEW & LUKE, THE WAY JESUS ENDED UP IN THE WILDERNESS IS BECAUSE HE WAS “LED” THERE BY THE SPIRIT.

NOT MARK.

MARK TELLS US THE SPIRIT “DROVE” HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS.

MARK USES THIS SAME WORD 11 TIMES IN HIS GOSPEL.

HE USES IT WHEN JESUS DRIVES OUT UNCLEAN SPIRITS FROM THOSE POSSESSED AND HE USES IT AS WELL WHEN HE TELLS US OF JESUS DRIVING OUT THE MONEY-CHANGERS FROM THE TEMPLE.

THE UNCLEAN SPIRITS DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE THE BODIES THEY POSSESSED AND THE MONEY-CHANGERS DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE THE TEMPLE THEY OCCUPIED.

THE WORD MARK USES IS A WORD OF FORCE – A WORD INDICATING SOMETHING IS BEING DONE AGAINST ANOTHER'S WILL.

WHAT MARK SEEMS TO BE TELLING US IS THAT JESUS DIDN'T VOLUNTARILY GO TO THE WILDERNESS.

HE DIDN'T WELCOME A TIME OF CHALLENGE, TEMPTATION & TESTING.

NOR DO WE.

THAT IMPORTANT WORD "WILDERNESS" IS SOMETHING WE ALL EXPERIENCE, THOUGH, ISN'T IT?

WE ALL GO THROUGH DIFFICULT AND CHALLENGING TIMES IN LIFE.

WE DON'T WANT IT, BUT THERE'S NO AVOIDING IT.

IT'S PART OF BEING ALIVE.

IT'S PART OF BEING HUMAN.

I THINK MARK WANTS US TO REALIZE THAT JESUS UNDERSTANDS WHAT IT'S LIKE FOR US TO BE IN THE WILDERNESS BECAUSE HE'S BEEN THERE HIMSELF.

PLEASE DON'T MISUNDERSTAND ME.

I'M NOT SUGGESTING, IN ANY WAY, THAT GOD IS THE ONE WHO CAUSES OUR PAIN & SUFFERING.

GOD DOESN'T PUNISH US BY FORCING US TO ENDURE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES.

I DON'T THINK THAT'S WHAT MARK IS SAYING HERE.

I THINK THE POINT TO TAKE AWAY IS THAT GOD IS WITH US IN THE WILDERNESS.

WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT JESUS ENDURED THE WILDERNESS JUST AS WE DO.

AND THIS STORY TELLS US THAT HE'S WITH US IN OUR OWN WILDERNESS.

BUT PERHAPS THERE'S EVEN MORE.

IF GOD IS WITH US IN OUR TESTING, OUR TEMPTATIONS, OUR PAIN & OUR SUFFERING, PERHAPS WE CAN SEE THAT GOD HOPES TO WORK WITH US TO ENABLE SOMETHING GOOD TO SOMEHOW EMERGE FROM THE MIDST OF LIFE'S DARKEST TRIALS.

WHEN WE FIND OURSELVES IN LIFE'S WILDERNESS, MIGHT WE BE ABLE TO ASK SOME SERIOUS & HELPFUL QUESTIONS?

MIGHT WE BE ABLE, IN OUR PRAYERS, TO ASK GOD HOW WE CAN TRANSFORM OUR MISERY INTO SOMETHING MIRACULOUS?

“LORD, I DIDN'T WANT THIS & I KNOW YOU DIDN'T WANT IT FOR ME EITHER.

BUT HERE I AM.

AND I KNOW YOU'RE WITH ME IN THIS WILDERNESS.

GOD, HELP ME BE OPEN TO WHAT GOOD CAN EMERGE FROM MY ANGUISH.

HELP ME TO SEE HOW YOU ARE WILLING TO STRENGTHEN ME & ENABLE ME TO HELP SOMEONE ELSE IN THEIR OWN TIME IN THE WILDERNESS OF LIFE.”

IN THE SEASON OF LENT, IT'S GOOD TO REMEMBER THAT GOD CAN TAKE SOMETHING BAD & TURN IT INTO SOMETHING GOOD.

AND ISN'T THAT THE NATURE OF GOD – TAKING THAT WHICH SEEMS ONLY TO CAUSE DEATH & SOMEHOW TRANSFORMING IT INTO RESURRECTION LIFE?

GOD STANDS WITH US IN EVERY WILDERNESS INTO WHICH WE ARE DRIVEN.

WHEN WE SEE OUR WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES FROM THAT PERSPECTIVE, PERHAPS WE CAN LOOK, WITH HOPE, TO WHAT MIGHT EMERGE FROM THEM.

IT'S LIKE THE POINT OF RONALD REAGAN'S FAVORITE JOKE.

FOR SOME OF YOU, THAT'S ALL THAT NEEDS TO BE SAID & YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT.

THERE WAS A FATHER WHO WAS GRAVELY CONCERNED ABOUT HIS TWIN 5-YEAR OLD SONS.

ONE WAS A COMPLETE PESSIMIST WHILE THE OTHER WAS AN INCURABLE OPTIMIST.

TRYING TO OFFSET THESE EXTREME TENDENCIES, HE FILLED HIS PESSIMIST SON'S ROOM WITH DOZENS OF NEW TOYS & SENT HIM INSIDE.

A WHILE LATER, THE FATHER LOOKED IN TO SEE HIS SON CRYING IN THE CORNER.

HE ASKED HIM WHAT WAS WRONG AND, THROUGH HIS SOBS, HIS SON SAID HE WAS AFRAID TO PLAY WITH ANY OF THE TOYS BECAUSE HE WAS SURE THAT IF HE DID, HE'D BREAK THEM.

IN THE ROOM OF HIS SON WHO WAS THE TOTAL OPTIMIST, THE FATHER PLACED A HUGE PILE OF MANURE.

AS HE OPENED THAT SON'S DOOR, HE SAW HIM LAUGHING & SCREAMING, DIGGING THROUGH THE DUNG.

THE FATHER ASKED WHAT IN THE WORLD HE WAS DOING AND HIS SON CRIED OUT, “*WITH ALL THIS MANURE, THERE’S GOTTA BE A PONY HERE SOMEWHERE!*”

WE ALL MARVEL AT THOSE PEOPLE IN OUR LIVES WHO ARE ABLE TO LOOK BEYOND THEIR SUFFERING – THOSE WHO, IN THE MIDST OF THE WILDERNESS, LOOK AT THE MANURE THAT SURROUNDS THEM & SEARCH FOR A PONY.

THERE ARE THOSE WHO SOMEHOW ARE ABLE TO SEE THE BRIGHTNESS OF GOD’S PRESENCE EVEN IN THE MIDST OF THEIR DARKEST DAYS.

THEIR EYES ARE ALWAYS OPEN TO DISCOVER HOW THEIR OWN HEARTACHE & TRAGEDY CAN BE USED BY GOD TO HELP SOMEONE ELSE.

THAT TAKES US TO TWO OTHER WORDS IN THIS PASSAGE THAT ARE VITALLY IMPORTANT.

WHEN JESUS WAS IN THE MIDST OF THE WILDERNESS, MARK SAYS “*HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS; AND THE ANGELS WAITED ON HIM.*”

WILD BEASTS & ANGELS.

WHAT A CONTRASTING, YET ACCURATE PICTURE OF LIFE IN GENERAL.

THERE ARE WILD BEASTS – FORCES OF EVIL – THAT CONSTANTLY POSE A THREAT TO US.

SOMETIMES THOSE BEASTS COME IN THE FORM OF BITTER CIRCUMSTANCES THAT ARE THRUST UPON US – SICKNESS. DISEASE, A FRACTURED RELATIONSHIP, A LOST JOB OR A LOST LOVED ONE.

SOMETIMES THE BEASTS ARE INSIDE – WE FIND OURSELVES WITH A DEADLY ADDICTION, AN UNFORGIVING HEART, A DEJECTED SPIRIT OR A LOST SOUL.

AND SOMETIMES THOSE BEASTS THAT THREATEN US ARE PEOPLE – PEOPLE WHO, IN THEIR OWN WILDERNESS, CHOOSE TO FIGHT & CLAW THEIR WAY OUT BY ATTACKING US.

WE ALL HAVE TO CONTEND WITH THE WILD BEASTS THAT WE MEET IN LIFE’S WILDERNESS.

BUT WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT JESUS HAD TO CONTEND WITH THE WILD BEASTS AS WELL.

HE KNOWS WHAT WE’RE GOING THROUGH WHEN THOSE WILD BEASTS ATTACK US BECAUSE HE WAS ATTACKED BY WILD BEASTS HIMSELF.

BUT WHAT CAN BRING US EVEN GREATER COMFORT IS IN KNOWING THAT IN THAT WILDERNESS, THERE AREN’T JUST WILD BEASTS.

WHAT DOES MARK SAY ABOUT JESUS’ EXPERIENCE IN THE WILDERNESS?

“HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS; AND THE ANGELS WAITED ON HIM.”

WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF IN LIFE’S WILDERNESS, DON’T BE CONSUMED BY THE WILD BEASTS.

DON’T FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON THE FORCES OF EVIL THAT ARE THREATENING TO DESTROY YOU.

LOOK FOR THE ANGELS THAT ARE THERE TO MINISTER TO YOU.

I THINK THAT’S ONE OF THE MOST VALUABLE LESSONS THAT MR. ROGERS TAUGHT US.

AS AN ORDAINED PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER & A MAN OF DEEP CHRISTIAN FAITH, FRED ROGERS KNEW WELL THIS STORY FROM MARK'S GOSPEL.

IN ONE OF HIS PROGRAMS ON HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH TRAGEDY, HE SAID, “WHEN I WAS A BOY AND I WOULD SEE SCARY THINGS IN THE NEWS, MY MOTHER WOULD SAY TO ME, ‘LOOK FOR THE HELPERS. YOU WILL ALWAYS FIND PEOPLE WHO ARE HELPING.’

TO THIS DAY, ESPECIALLY IN TIMES OF DISASTER, I REMEMBER MY MOTHER’S WORDS AND I’M ALWAYS COMFORTED BY REALIZING THAT THERE ARE STILL SO MANY HELPERS – SO MANY CARING PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD.

THIS IS WHAT WE CAN DO FOR OUR CHILDREN.

WE CAN GIVE THEM USEFUL TOOLS THAT WILL SERVE THEM ALL THEIR LIFE, AND HELP THEM TO BECOME THE WORLD’S FUTURE PEACEMAKERS – THE WORLD’S FUTURE HELPERS.”

YOU KNOW WHO THOSE PEACEMAKERS – THOSE HELPERS – THOSE ANGELS – ARE IN YOUR OWN LIFE, DON’T YOU?

PERHAPS YOU HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT A BIT, BUT YOU KNOW THEY’VE BEEN WITH YOU IN THE PAST & YOU KNOW THEY’RE WITH YOU TODAY.

MAYBE THAT WOULD BE A GOOD EXERCISE TO ENGAGE IN THIS LENTEN SEASON – TAKE INVENTORY OF THE ANGELS IN YOUR LIFE WHO HAVE WALKED WITH YOU IN YOUR WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES.

AND OF EQUAL – OR PERHAPS EVEN GREATER IMPORTANCE – THINK OF THE WAY THAT YOU MIGHT BE CALLED BY GOD TO SERVE AS AN ANGEL IN THE WILDERNESS TRIALS OF SOMEONE ELSE.

PERHAPS THAT'S AN IMPORTANT PART OF WHAT MARK IS TRYING TO TELL US WHEN HE TALKS OF THE SPIRIT "DRIVING" OR "FORCING" OR "PROPELLING" JESUS INTO THE WILDERNESS.

MAYBE GOD WANTS TO DRIVE US INTO THE WILDERNESS OF ANOTHER – TO STAND WITH THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, HARASSED OR IGNORED BY SOCIETY – TO WALK WITH THE LONELY, SCARED, DISCOURAGED, GRIEVING OR DEPRESSED – TO LIFT UP THE POOR, THE HUNGRY, THE HOMELESS, THE OUTCAST.

IT'S SO TEMPTING TO DO OTHERWISE.

IT'S SO TEMPTING TO STAY OUT OF THE WILDERNESS – TO REMAIN WHERE LIFE IS CALM & SAFE & COMFORTABLE.

BUT GOD'S SPIRIT CONTINUES TO GRAB HOLD OF US & THAT SPIRIT THRUSTS US OUT INTO THE WORLD'S WILDERNESS TO SERVE AS ANGELS TO THOSE IN PAIN & SORROW.

IRONICALLY, IT IS THERE – THERE IN THE WILDERNESS – THERE IN THE MIDST OF LIFE'S MOST PAINFUL EXPERIENCES -THAT WE MEET CHRIST BECAUSE HE'S ALREADY THERE.

HE'S THERE WAITING FOR US & HE'LL STAND BY OUR SIDE IN THE BATTLE TO DEFEAT THE WILD BEASTS THAT ATTACK US.

HE'S THERE TO COMFORT US & GUIDE US AS WE FIND OURSELVES THRUST INTO THE WILDERNESS TO SERVE AS ANGELS TO THOSE IN THEIR OWN WILDERNESS OF LIFE. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*

