



## “Angels in the Wilderness”

*Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg*

*February 18, 2018*

*Mark 1:9-15*

Beginnings matter. And at the beginning of my sermons, I usually have a captivating story, a funny anecdote, or a witty saying to draw your attention to the word about to be preached. But today, it isn't a story that begins my sermon, it is the recognition that baptism is the beginning that matters. That is why we begin our worship services with baptism and it is why we began our service today with the baptism of Behnoush Ghodsi. Baptism is also the premier event that draws us into this first Sunday of Lent. In this text from the Gospel of Mark, baptism is the first action that ultimately draws our attention to the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. And as you know, we already had Baptism of Jesus Sunday several weeks ago. Well, the Lenten season in the lectionary always begins with a temptation narrative of Jesus. And so, in order to experience the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, we must review Jesus's baptism as the beginning story that helps us understand and accept the moments of wilderness wanderings that are sure to come.

But, we don't stay in this beginning too long as we immediately see Jesus driven into the desert, tempted by Satan, accompanied by wild animals, and waited on by angels. It happens immediately! The early church, the readers of the Gospel of Mark, needed to know that God would be with them and that Jesus would immediately return. These first century persecuted Christians were in constant fear for the lives, worried about the looming empire seeking to capture and kill them. And they knew what it was like to be baptized into Jesus's mission one day and then chased by the beasts of Rome the next. And just like the persecuted church, it seems we too are always moving quickly and immediately between the proud baptismal waters to the dry, barren landscape. From the words, “You are my beloved” to the silence of rejection. From the community of baptism to the loneliness of the desert. From the embrace of the waters and the realization of a calling to the emptiness of the wilderness and pain of temptation. Our lives flutter immediately back and forth between baptism and temptation and we can't seem to catch our breath.

The words “and immediately” pound through the Gospel of Mark like the scared heartbeat of a persecuted people. If you read Mark in the Greek, you read those same two words over and over again: *kai euthos...kai euthos...kai euthos...and immediately...and immediately...and immediately*. And, the first time we read this phrase in this Gospel is when Jesus is rising out of the Jordan River at his baptism. “And just as (*kai euthos*) he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” And then, a verse later we hear it again: “And the Spirit immediately (*kai euthos*) drove him out into the wilderness.”

The scholars I read and studied freely commented on the war-time nature of the Gospel of Mark. Mark was the first gospel written, and it was drafted either in the years immediately leading up to, or the years immediately following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70BCE. So, it was an anxious, urgent time. The early Christians were moving between moments of baptism and times of wilderness, living in the hope that Jesus had already been there before them.

The Gospel of Mark wasn't supposed to be a work of art. The author was writing an urgent, wartime witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Only the simple and quick facts were needed because I think Mark, and Jesus, believed that the spiritual life and ministry itself should be shrouded in urgency. When life and death, light and darkness, hope and despair, love and hate are at stake, there is no time to simply linger in the cool baptismal waters, watching those lost in the wilderness scrounge for life. People are hurting, fearful, sick, hungry, thirsty, and mired in marginalization and discrimination. Light and life and love need to be unleashed on the world immediately, *kai euthos!* Right now!

And so, it is the same with Jesus. Right on the heels of being baptized and named as God's Son, Jesus was immediately cast out into the wilderness. Preacher and author Brian K. Blount writes, "You want to know what happens when you get ... touched by the power of God's Spirit? You don't sit still and enjoy the view, you don't lay down and take a nap, you don't bask in the glory of what great thing just happened to you. You go immediately to wild work. To work for God is to be thrown directly into the path of those who would oppose God." So, it was for Jesus, for while in the wilderness, he was tempted by Satan, surrounded by fear, and stalked by wild animals.

I like what Mark's incredibly short account says about Jesus in the wilderness. It says he was "tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Jesus faced his temptations and his fears, but God was looking out for him. It doesn't say he wasn't afraid. I'm sure the howling of the wolves, the groans of a parched land, and sound of a sizzling sun were enough to worry even the Son of God. Just like us, Jesus experienced fear in the wilderness. But we get a dove's eye view, a Spirit's glimpse, that he had invisible company. If we understand that "angel" means "messenger," then all of us can look for God's messages of peace, stillness, hope, and courage while in the wilderness.

In this short and sparse Gospel, that moves us from one immediate scene to the next, Mark took the time to include the angels in the text. Mark took the time to mention the angels because they were important to Jesus. In Luke's version of the same story, Luke leaves out any mention of the angels entirely. In Matthew's Gospel, the angels only show up at the very end of the story. But in Mark, they're waiting on Jesus, serving Jesus, protecting Jesus, accompanying Jesus, the whole time, all forty days. And like Jesus, in the long loneliness of Lent, we are not alone.

The angels in the wilderness remind us that God will not abandon us during our scary sojourns. God is, after all, in the business of taking that which seems only to cause death and somehow wring from it resurrection life. And that's not a bad thing to remember at the beginning of Lent. It's not a bad thing to remember at the end of the Lenten journey lies Easter and new life. I want us to be able to look at our struggles, hear the promise of God's presence with us, and look for God at work in and through us for the sake of this world God loves so much. I know in Lent we

feel we can walk the road of suffering alone, that we are strong enough to live in the wilderness of Lent. Yet, God tears away our every attempt to say, “While I appreciate your help, God, I’ve got this. I can figure it out.” Lent reminds us of our mortality and our need for God and God’s angels.

Lent also reminds us of our beginnings, our baptisms. We remember our baptisms as we are driven into the wilderness. We, too, are given the promise of God’s presence. When we are thrown deep into the wilderness places, the lonely places, the hurting places, the hospital rooms, the hospice centers, the cemeteries, we remember our baptisms. We remember our beginnings. When we are driven into the painful spaces where our children are killed while trying to get an education, we remember our beginnings. When we have friends and loved ones fearing they will be taken from their families and deported, we remember our beginnings. When we sit in the hospital room or the hospice center, the wild beasts of grief surrounding us, we remember our beginnings. When we are driven into the wilderness of Lent, with the ashes of our mortality still smudged and fresh on our foreheads, we remember our beginnings.

We remember that God loves us so much that God ripped open the heavens to speak words of comfort and hope. We remember that God calls us beloved and because we are beloved God will never leave us. We remember that when the wild beasts of the world and the wild beasts in our heads and the wild beasts in our hearts seek to devour us and scare us and hurt us that God’s spirit which drove us into these times of wilderness, and darkness, and temptation is still with us. And we know this because there are angels in the wilderness. There are angels in the wilderness to protect us, to watch over us, and as the text says, to serve and wait on us. The angels in the wilderness waited on Jesus and the angels in our lives will be with us as well.

Do you know the term that is used for the angels waiting on Jesus? The term is *diakonos*, which means service. The angels were deacons. They gave Jesus food, they gave him water, they gave him protection, they gave him company. And that is what we do when we call deacons to serve our church. They are to care for you and be with you and wait on you. They travel the wilderness places of your lives with you and experience what you experience. It is no accident that the author of Mark puts the angels in the same place as the wild beasts. They are together. The angels took the same risks and experienced the same trials, and heartache, and pain, and hunger as Jesus. And the angels in our lives do the same for us.

At Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, there was an angel in the wilderness. The assistant football coach, Aaron Feis, used his body to shield three female students from the bullets. Those students lived while Coach Feis died from his wounds. Feis took on the wild beasts and was an angel in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of both angels and beasts. And we experience angels and beasts every day. In the grief and fear and despair, the kind that makes us question who we are and if God is really with us, the angels are there. Angels are in the wilderness. Angels are those marvelous people of God - some we’ve known for a lifetime, and others are strangers out of the blue, who have made themselves known in tender acts of kindness and whispers into our souls, reminding us that we are God’s beloved.

And we need angels and we need each other this Lenten season when the medical appointments get too draining, and the bills get too high, and the pain gets too great, and the grief gets to be too

much to bear. We must accompany each other in the midst of the loneliness, the fear, and the temptations. There are angels in the wilderness. It's important to remember that.

But I also invite us to do another Lenten inventory, an accounting of the angels we have known and loved and who have loved us, in the wilderness times of our own lives. To remember, as Mark remembered, those angels that showed up when we were tired, thirsty, and surrounded by wild beasts - just as they did for Jesus. Our wilderness angels probably don't look like what we think angels should. No long white robes, no rustling wings, no divine glow. Instead they resemble my middle-school teacher, Mr. Harris, a vibrant black man with a preacher's voice and pastor's heart. They resemble my dear friend and encourager, Louise Davis, who passed away two weeks ago. She was the matriarch of my previous church and used her position of power to nurture the best out of me. They are like the many of you in this church who believe in me when I have a hard time believing in myself. Maybe one of your angels is the person who reminds you that, in the words of William Sloan Coffin, there "is more grace in God than sin in us." There are angels in the wilderness.

Lent begins with Jesus's 40-day journey into the wilderness with the wild beasts and the waiting angels. Our Lenten journey also leads us into such wilderness times and places, be they in our own lives or in the world around us. Yes, it can be a difficult journey filled with fearsome things, not the least of which are our own failings and the times we've let those fearsome things get the best of us. In our own deserts of Lent, we can feel surrounded by the wild beasts of despair or the prowling animals of regret. But even in such a time, we must not forget about the angels in the wilderness. Mark didn't forget the angels, even in the urgency of the text and persecution of the time, and neither should we. "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him." Even in the wilderness, according to Mark, the angels got the last word. May that be true for us in our wilderness journey this Lent, too.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.