

"WHILE I WAS WATCHING"

Mark 1:9-15

1st Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2018

Mark 1:9-15

9-11 At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

God's Kingdom Is Here

12-13 At once, this same Spirit pushed Jesus out into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by Satan. Wild animals were his companions, and angels took care of him.

14-15 After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: "Time's up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message."

As is characteristic in Mark's Gospel, the quiet places in between his sentences are ripe for interpretation, and storytelling. Unlike the familiar exchanges between Jesus and Satan as told by Matthew and Luke in their gospel stories, both written after Mark's, we are told by him only a skeleton tale the story of Jesus and Satan in the wilderness. We merely learn that the Spirit of God drives Jesus to the place where he is to be tested. Proclaimed by the prophet, John, claimed by baptism, praised privately by God who speaks only to him, and driven off into the wilderness for forty days, Jesus begins his ministry in a Markan whirlwind of just a precious few verses. The

Gospel writer tells us only of his wilderness experience that as Satan tested him, Jesus was "with the wild animals and that angels took care of him."

Translating from the original Greek language of Mark's gospel, the Holy Spirit acting on orders from God, casts Jesus out into the wilderness. In Matthew and Luke's version, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus to the wilderness, a much more peaceful and loving act. Mark has no room or time for such niceties. The word he chooses is *ekballo*, the same term for "casting out" used for Jesus' exorcisms. The use of these two words in the text signals the presence of Satan in the world, the evil energy that is about to be challenged by a counterforce who will redefine, reform, and reverse all expectations, even as he fulfills the hopes and promises of salvation.

Mark's forceful word underscores the importance and urgency of Jesus' wilderness experience, harkening the listener back to when the Israelites were driven there for forty years. As the ancestors of the Jewish faith were cast out into a period of forced wilderness retreat and discernment, so Jesus is driven into his own period of testing, of *peirazo* from which he will emerge ready to begin in earnest his short, but world-changing ministry.

Hear now the creative voices of the wild animals and angels that found themselves in the midst of the wilderness experience of Jesus:

I am Cave Lion. I live in the wilderness away from the Jordan River with the rest of my pride—my mate, my little ones, my cousins, and my elders. We have our own families, and we live as one larger community. We are sustained by hunting smaller game and foraging the berries that grow on the bushes within our reach. Of all the animals in the wilderness, we eat first. We drink first in the pools of the oasis. Only when we have had our fill may the Oryx, the sand cat, and the gazelle eat and drink. I have no enemy in the wilderness; I am the enemy, and no one dares challenge me.

We rarely see humans in the wilderness; they do not dare come here to our territory, for they know it will not go well for them. They do not hunt us. They do not challenge us. They keep a wide berth away from us if they know what is good for them, for we are strong, and we are the hunters of the weak.

But I must tell you of one night, one night I will never forget as long as I walk this earth. On this one evening, a man alone came walking quickly into the wilderness near our home. Though it was a calm night and the skies were calm, a wind pushed this man along. Yes, it was as though he had his own personal wind driving him deep into the wilds, right to where my young ones fitfully slept.

His hair was wildly blowing every which way; his cloak barely covered him, and he was shivering with the cold. He seemed to have no direction. He carried no hunting weapons and no tools. His eyes darted

this way and that, and the wind just pushed him forward so that he nearly fell with each forced step he took. As he drew near, I could tell that he had no bedroll, no supplies that he would surely need to survive the harsh conditions of the wilderness. What was he thinking, coming out here alone and totally unprepared to meet the elements or the wild animals that called this desolate place their home? I sniffed the air, but I could not pick up a smell of any food or water about him. "He must be crazy," I thought to myself.

The wind shifted, and I heard him cry out into the night sky:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

*and by night, but find no rest.**

He was alone. He was vulnerable, and he was mine. I hunkered down, waiting, and watching for my opportunity. In the cave behind me, my little ones were stirring. I was vaguely aware of them, but I had my eyes and ears glued on this strange man in the clearing, talking to himself.

*"Get behind me, Satan!" I heard him cry out. "Why do you test me, so? You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!" ***

I looked around, but I saw no one else. The man sat down heavily on a rock and put his head in his hands. He was crying softly, and I found myself conflicted. On the one paw, he was an easy mark for me, and I don't often get easy opportunities to feed my family. On the other paw, he was in pain—the real heartbreaking, down deep, hopeless kind of pain and his pain froze me in place.

He seemed to be tormented, hungry, and afraid, arguing with this someone out in the darkness. Not knowing who might be out there with him, I decided to keep my place and see what was to happen. We cats are naturally curious, you know.

The man talked about his "Father in heaven." He said that his praise and his worship, his faith and his trust belonged to his Father, not to this other voice coming out from the darkness. There was an angry, loud, and threatening answer spit out at him that I could not understand, but to his credit, the man held his ground against it. I was beginning to sense that I was a witness to a cosmic battle of wills. I was in a special place at a special time, watching a special man battle his undisclosed demons. This was getting interesting.

Suddenly, there appeared a break in the clouds and a light shone down all around him. It seemed to come out of nowhere. I shrunk back into the bushes a bit further, a little afraid and a lot intrigued. A loaf of bread and a jug of drink appeared by the man. Where did that come from?? He seemed to hear what I could not, as he looked up, said a word of thanks, and then hungrily tore into the bread and drank deeply from the flask. Tears were streaming down his face. My salivary glands were watering. It was time to make my move.

But then I heard it, and somehow, I could understand it, spoken it was in my own language. It came from the light, and the light pushed the darkness away from the man. The words stopped me in my tracks, and I strained to listen to them:

*May there be peace within. May you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others. May you use the gifts that you have received and pass on the love that has been given to you. May you be content with yourself just the way you are. Let this knowledge settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each and every one of us. ****

The man relaxed. The light shone all around him, and I could swear that the light came from within him, too. The darkness was kept

at bay and after a time, the man laid down on the ground, shivering a bit, and falling into a fitful sleep.

I watched. And I waited. And I was drawn to him. Quietly, tentatively, but purposefully, I crept near the man until I was standing over him. I could feel his unsteady breath on my whiskers; I could see him shivering in the cold. I laid down next to him, right up against him, lending my warmth to him. He stirred quietly, but fell back asleep, and in time, his breathing matched mine. My little ones appeared at my other side, and soon we were all snoring peacefully.

What a night. My prey-- my enemy-- became my friend. The light bathed us gently all night long, and I did not hear or feel the malevolent voice from the darkness again. In the morning, my kits and I went foraging for berries and other edibles, and we brought some back in our mouths for the man. I let him pet me and he talked with me gently, blessing me and my family. "He walked with me, and he talked with me, and he told me I was his own. And the joy we shared, as we tarried there, none other has ever known." **

What is the lesson here, my sisters and my brothers? As Mark E. Yurs commented in an essay I read before I wrote this message for the 1st Sunday in Lent, "...the encouraging word is this: even a

wilderness can be faced if you look for the angels God sends to the tempted and the troubled. This is true even if the wilderness has Satan and wild beasts within."

May It Be So.

*** Psalm 22**

**** Mark 8:29-33** Jesus is talking later to Peter in this passage, but I have imagined it belonging in the wilderness story.

******* This was an anonymous writing given to me at my Ordination in 2010. I came across it as I reached for a resource book I was planning to use for this week's sermon. Funny how God reminds us that we belong to the Holy Spirit.

******** "*In the Garden*," traditional hymn, C. Austin Miles (1868-1946)