

1 Lent

February 18, 2021

Mark 1: 9-15 & Genesis 9: 8-17

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Once upon a time...well, this week, in fact, there was a man who for Lent, had given up his favorite breakfast treat--Krispy Kreme donuts. He was doing so well, and then Thursday (just a day after Ash Wednesday) he heard that there was a special "Mars Donut" only available that day! Commemorating the Mars rover landing, it was dipped in reddish caramel frosting and had chocolate cookie sprinkles. This was historic! He had to get some; God would understand.

When he walked into work, carrying a box of donuts, his co-workers gave him the business, but he said he could explain. He said, "You know these are exclusive, just for today. So, I went to Krispy Kreme and all the way there I prayed: 'God, I know I promised. But if you are ok with me having this treat just today, have an open parking space right by the front door.' And what do you know? *On my 8th time driving around the store, there it was!*"

Funny, and pretty inconsequential, but too true also. Isn't that often the way we rationalize temptation? From the time we tell our parents "Everyone else was doing it!" to our adulthood of "Who's gonna know, really?" we find a way to justify the choices we make, the paths we take, some of which end up being more momentous than we think. Often our reaction to being 'found out' in those choices or paths is to feel shame, or feel guilty; to feel as if (unlike everyone else) we just don't have our act together.

You may have been taught or you may think that all of Lent is meant to be full of those kinds of feelings: a 40 day painful march to the relief of Easter. But is it that?

"In those days," Mark begins his telling of the Jesus story. "In those days" we may hear like 'once upon a time,' but it's not. Mark is signaling us to think about *which* days he is talking about: 'in those days,' the days when God's people had lived without a direct word from God for 500 years. Malachi was the last prophet in the Hebrew Bible and then, nothing but quiet.

Until John the Baptist exploded on the scene, until Jesus, hair still wet from baptism, was *driven* into the wilderness by the Spirit. Forty days of temptation by Satan, and Mark says “Jesus was with the wild beasts.” Think about that image for a minute. Do you picture Jesus as a circus lion tamer, a whip in one hand, a chair in another, keeping ravenous animals at bay? Or is Jesus encircled by all the wild ‘things’--thoughts and feelings that come with being human: fear, doubt, pain, confusion, you name it.

Mark’s Gospel is succinct--there’s no dialogue between Jesus and Satan, no negotiation as there is in Matthew and Luke: turn these stones to bread; leap off the Temple; worship me... Mark tells us just what he feels we need to know. Forty days gives a person--Jesus--a whole lot of time to think, to experience the desert’s scorching days and freezing nights, to be surrounded by wild things and hear their stalking steps and whispered challenges.

“With the wild beasts”...what do those words bring to mind for you? For some of us, we remember a terrible time in our lives, when those who were supposed to love and care for us did not. Or a time when others at school or work or in your own family turned against you. The monster of addiction, the agony of self-hatred, that heavy weight of shame and guilt. We’ve been with the wild beasts, haven’t we?

Mark’s succinct Gospel is an interesting one to pair with the verses we heard from Genesis. For Noah and family, the 40 day long storm is over. A rainbow appears in the sky--not as a sign for God’s people, but as a sign for *God*. “When I see it,” God says, “I will remember the everlasting covenant between me and you that never again will the waters overwhelm the earth.” God becomes known as a God who *remembers*--remembers creation, people, and promises.

“You are my Son, the Beloved,” God says, just before Jesus’ days in the wilderness. Jesus was with the wild beasts there, and “the angels waited on him.” Not like the efficient waitstaff of your favorite restaurant, no--the word means ‘tended,’ as a shepherd does with sheep...as a loving mother tends a child. God *remembers* Jesus, and Jesus remembers the voice that spoke powerful love by the

baptismal waters of the Jordan. And day by day Jesus finds his way through the wilderness. The desert does not disappear by magic; no chair or whip appears to drive away the beasts...just the strong embracing love of God that does not let go.

So often our tempting, testing, wild beast moments involve nothing like donuts. Instead, they are clustered around that awful word 'if.'

"If you are so gifted, why doesn't anyone seem to care about that?"

"If you are such a nice person, why are you so lonely?"

"If that happened to you, you must have deserved it."

"If he/she/they don't love you, who will?"

The simple, complicated answer to that is that God will. We will spend our lives reminding ourselves of that, again and again--and remembering that God *remembers* us, *tends* to us; and calls us to help one another know, and those around us know that promise deeply, too.

Jesus' ministry begins in the experience of the wilderness. Leaving it, Jesus will go on to demonstrate, to manifest God's determined love for the world. Through Jesus, we come to hear clearly those words that claim us and enfold us, in the wilderness, through Lent, and beyond: "You are mine."