

Where the Wild Things Are
Mark 1:9-15; Genesis 9:8-17
Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Prayer

God our Mother,
you bring human beings into the world,
babies, beautiful and vulnerable, helpless and amazing,
each one a miraculous achievement of physical grace,
with minds and hearts and lungs and eyes and hands;
and though not everything always works perfectly in every one,
and many tears are shed when unforeseen challenges present themselves,
the blueprint is beyond the scope of human imagination,
amazing as even that great gift is.

God our Father,
you see young people sent off to war;
you strengthen sons and daughters
who put their lives on the line for the sake of others;
you call young people with missionary zeal into your service,
in places far from home
or tough neighborhoods in their own country.
You watch over everyone,
knowing each one is a loved one of someone,
and you keep vigil over all living things.
You see school children and young adolescents
go out the door to schools or parks
or movie theaters or restaurants.
And, O God, you know what is awaiting us all,
and Abba, Father, our brother Jesus has taught us
to commend ourselves and our spirits
into your loving hand and your eternal care.

God our teacher and our friend,
our Judge and Redeemer,
our Lord and Master;

King of kings, Lord of lords,
Sovereign over all who hold seats of power,
Captain of the captains of industry
who profit from the easy and vast and lucrative sale
of military grade weapons
into a civil society
of schools and playgrounds and movie theaters and restaurants,

Judge us, O God, in your mercy; for Christ's sake, judge us,
because your judgement is righteous,
while the judgement we inflict upon ourselves
is the slaughter of our babies,
amid either cacophonies of babbling nonsense
or a deafening, dumb silence from many of our officials,
amid corruption openly flaunted by political operatives
and celebrated by cheerleaders
in the booming, Wild West industry of opinion-driven media,
accountable only to corporate shareholders.

Please, God, please, I pray with hope, and trepidation,
and trust in your gracious mercy:
please unleash your judgement upon us all.

At least your judgement is just and righteous
and loving and merciful,
unlike ours, which is driven by fear
and let loose in the world by willful faithlessness
to our God and our neighbor and ourselves.

Judge our cowardice against the courage of
the student who held a door so that other students could escape,

and died of his gunshot wounds;
the football coach who threw his body
between a sick shooter's AR-15
and students in the line of fire, absorbed a hail of gunfire,
and died of his gunshot wounds;
the athletic director who unhesitatingly risked his life
to protect others,
and died of his gunshot wounds.

Please, O God, in your mercy,
please judge us in this Lenten season
with more righteousness than we can muster;
our own judgement has proven clouded and inadequate.
Judge us all, O God, until the carnage stops
and we no longer fall into sleepless bed
with the cries of bereaved parents in our ears
and the blood of our preposterously violent society's children
on our hands which have so often failed you.

If it be your will, O God,
and only if it be your will,
so be it; in your mercy. Amen.

The Sermon

Have you ever been to the wilderness?

Every Lent, I haul out Frederick Buechner's Lent questions just like every Advent I bring out Christmas lights and the artificial tree. They are, in a way, a journey into the wilderness.

"If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or there isn't, which side would get your money and why?"ⁱ

If you had to bet everything you have—your home, your money, your insurance, your car, your cell phone, your photographs, your reputation—“on whether there is a God or there isn’t, which side would get your money, and why?”ⁱⁱ

“When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?”

“If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?”

“Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?”

“Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?”

“If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Buechner says, “After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.”^{iv}

“Percy Harrison Fawcett was the quintessential dashing late-Victorian explorer...”^v A book about him came out about ten years ago; a reviewer of that book summarized it like this:

“Tall, steely and virtually indestructible, [Percy Fawcett] spent much of his life mapping the Amazon basin.

“In 1925 he set out to find a legendary city he called Z, a glittering oasis of civilization supposedly sequestered deep in the jungle. Whereupon the jungle, having nibbled at him for decades, ate him alive.

“Before he left, Fawcett remarked, ‘If with all my experience we can’t make it, there’s not much hope for others.’ About that much he was right. Dozens of search parties followed him in...and as many as 100 people died in the hunt.

“In the years that followed his disappearance, looking for Fawcett practically became a fad. One would-be rescuer, an English movie actor named Albert de Winton, was found by some Indians years later ‘floating, naked and half-mad, in a canoe.’ ...In 1979, Fawcett’s signet ring came to light in a shop in Brazil. The man himself never did.”^{vi}

I like to imagine that Mark would have been intrigued by a brash, daring, larger-than-life explorer like Fawcett, who waded into the Amazon and, as the author of that book described it, his men moved fast, and anyone who couldn’t keep up was left behind, to be swallowed up by the jungle.

The point of that, they said, was, in a way, humanitarian: he knew that every day he and his men spent traipsing through the deep wilderness was another day of risks of everything from animal attacks, to disease, to starvation, to who knows what. They *had* to move as quickly as possible to get the whole ordeal over with as quickly as possible.

But they never made it out, leaving the rest of the world to wonder: what ever happened to Percy Fawcett, and the adventurers who went into the deep wilderness with him?

Have you ever been to the wilderness?

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit

descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

He was in the wilderness for 40 days to endure a test proctored by a character whom we first met in the Old Testament—a member of God’s heavenly court called The Accuser or, in Hebrew, *ha-Satan*, transliterated into English as “Satan.”

As usual with Mark, of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, we get no dialogue, no reasons, no explanations, no interpretations.

But just like in both Matthew and Luke, the public ministry that graphs the blueprint for all of us who would follow Jesus comes only after he emerges from that crucible in the wilderness.

Have you ever been through the wilderness crucible? Proverbs 17:3 says, “The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.”

A few years ago, the musician Peter Gabriel was talking about his experiences in group therapy, and he said,

“I discovered the most unbelievable phenomena within myself, characteristics which I value for myself, but also characteristics with which I would rather not be confronted, like unlimited rage, or merciless hatred. I didn’t know about these sides of myself at all, but they were undoubtedly there. And they’re still there today. The effect of the therapy was that I had to come to terms with this.”^{vii}

It’s not inappropriate for a disciple to wonder: if the Spirit were to drive me into that wilderness, if I were to make that journey deep into the interior, what am I going to find?

What wild beasts might be waiting in there, roaring their terrible roar, gnashing their terrible teeth, rolling their terrible eyes, showing their terrible claws?^{viii}

And once I gather up, like Percy Harrison Fawcett, all the courage and confidence and self-will I can muster to get in there, how do I know I'll make it back out?

An actor named Tracee Ellis Ross was recently presented with a recognition called the "Fierce and Fearless Award" for her work, and in her acceptance speech, she said:

"I am often afraid...but I have come to understand and listen to the fear. I walk [toward] it and I lean into it to find information and things that it has to teach me."

Except, she said, if "it says run – and then I run. I run very fast and I cry a lot and I text and I email and all those kinds of things, but otherwise I pay attention and I learn."

But, she said, "[I'm] no longer afraid of being afraid."^{ix}

Have you ever been to the wilderness?

I'll call him Tony; while his wife had always been active, Tony became active in church life only in late middle age, just after retirement following a successful career in a large firm with a nice pension. People at church knew him as a good guy, a real contributor: participated in most church-based events, and a real mensch outside of church activities.

What they didn't know was that most days Tony would wake up, start drinking, and not stop until he was lying on the floor.

Tony credited church life for helping him find the strength and courage to get help, drying out and starting on a program to which, to his dying day, as far as I know anyway, he remained impeccably faithful.

He and I were having a conversation very similar to this, and looking at the text, I said, “There may be wild beasts in there; but there may be some angels in there too.”

And Tony said to me, with a hard-earned smile that only wisdom could produce, “When I went into the wilderness, I saw that *God* was there.”

A lot of times, these days, it feels like we’re already all deep in the wilderness, and sometimes it seems like the wild beasts seem to have the upper hand.

There is nothing faithless about feeling unsure of yourself in the face of overwhelming challenges, bafflement in the face of intellectual absurdities, or rage at human atrocities.

A rabbinic scholar once paraphrased an essential part of the Talmud: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”^x

God said to Noah, “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with all the beasts in every wilderness: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

As Graham Greene wrote in a book called *Brighton Rock*, “You cannot conceive, nor can I, of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”^{xi}

God doesn’t want to destroy you. God wants to give you every opportunity to be more like Jesus.

And God’s covenant was made not only with humankind, but “with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you.”

Maybe even the beasts that roam and roar and roll their eyes and gnash their teeth in our interior landscape—in here, where the wild things are.

May these forty days give you clarity and hope and strength.

May they draw you closer to God.

May you come out of this wilderness more able and more inclined to love your neighbor and yourself.

May your wilderness experience bring you face to face
with whatever interior beasts you need to encounter;
and may you learn from that encounter
that they can be whispered into submission,
with God’s help and, perhaps, the help of others.

And when you are ready to emerge on the far side of your wilderness,
whatever it may be,
may the angels come and see you safely through,
and lead us all onward to a bright Easter morning.

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ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 74

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 74

ⁱⁱⁱ Buechner, *Whistling*, 74-75

^{iv} Buechner, *Whistling*, 74

^v Lev Grossman, “Jungle Fever” (*Time Magazine*, Thursday, Feb. 19, 2009)

^{vi} Grossman, “Jungle Fever”

^{vii} <http://www.petergabriel.com/us/index.html> under the heading “Therapy,” last retrieved in 2009 (Since deleted.)

^{viii} This language, and the title of this sermon, are from the classic children’s book: Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (HarperCollins 1963), 17

^{ix} Mariah Haas, “Tracee Ellis Ross in Emotional Speech: ‘I Am Often Afraid,’ But ‘I Have Come to Understand and Listen to The Fear.’” *People Celebrity*, February 27, 2016 12:20 AM (<http://people.com/celebrity/tracee-ellis-ross-i-am-often-afraid/>)

^x Rami Shapiro, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*, 41. Paraphrase of Rabbi Rami Shapiro’s interpretive translation of Rabbi Tarfon’s work on the *Pirke Avot* 2:16. The text is a commentary on *Michah* 6:8.

^{xi} Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Penguin Classics, reprint 2004)