

## **Wild Animals and Angels**

Sermon by Tom Robinson

3-1-09

Thanks to the artistic talents of Sandi Ciarrone, we are graced this Lent with a new way of marking time. It is called the Lenten Wreath, and it operates in a way similar to that of the Advent Wreath, which we use to count down the weeks until Christmas. Only with the Lenten Wreath we don't light candles; we extinguish them, gradually darkening the Sanctuary as we move toward Maundy Thursday.

As we do this, we will hear selected readings that will call us to worship over the next six weeks. Normally we call each other to worship with a litany, but we know that this is not just any time. Lent is far from business as usual in the life of the church. Lent used to be celebrated with fasting, and still is in some places. I remember from our Lansing days an African-American church with whom we shared a community Good Friday service, and they always fasted between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. But that sounds like heresy to us Presbyterians who treat eating like it was the third sacrament. But it recognized that things are not the same; the whole order of life has been changed, and our focus is supposed to be on something else besides ourselves.

Lent marks the 40 days before Easter, and 40 is a big deal in the Bible. It marks the duration of the flood, which we noted in our Old Testament reading this morning; the duration of the journey through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land; and the length of Elijah's journey away from Jezebel and her murderous intentions toward the cave of the Still Small Voice. What makes all of this significant is that these are time periods which mark a threat on human life; our very existence is at stake. But they also mark something else – the hand of a loving and giving God to save us from that peril.

That's a critical element to keep in mind in the times in which we live. For we are in days of great peril ourselves. We know of those perils all too well, from economic crisis to job layoffs to a world at war in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. We know we are in peril.

And so what does God do? God pushes out into a place where we are in even more peril.

That should sound really strange to you. If not maybe you're not listening. Jesus goes through his baptism, which we marked earlier this year, and sees the presence of God descending on him like a dove. But then this peaceful, sweet dove turns into something out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie as it pushes, drives Jesus out into the wilderness, out into a place that symbolized the presence of all the forces that threaten God's gift of life. That should sound strange. Usually when we talk about driving our children somewhere we kid about them driving us crazy (and they return the insult), but we know why. We drive them to this activity and to that activity, to make sure they are where they need to be, and to make sure they get there safely. We push our children, but to do their best in school, to make the right kind of friends, to be the best they can be. And sometimes we just keep on doing it, we keep on taking care of them, even when they are adults and need to learn to do it themselves. We are hot-wired to take care of our children, not drive them out to the place where their existence is in serious question.

But that is exactly where Abba, Jesus' Father, sends him through the Spirit; God just pushes Jesus right out there to the wilderness, out there to be tested by Satan. We get more of a blow-by-blow

account from Matthew and Luke, but Mark's bare-bones account has more of a chilling effect; we don't know exactly what went on out there but we know it must have been really tough. For Jesus to hear that he was God's beloved child meant that the temptations he faced, the testing he endured, was harder than any of us can imagine. The closer you are to God, the tougher the temptations are. Many a deeply spiritual person has been side tracked when they started congratulating themselves on how holy they were and how spiritual they felt. Forgetting that God has sent a Messiah and that it is not me has been the fall of many a preacher and lay leader.

There were other forces out there besides Satan, though. Mark tells us that wild animals were there, too, and angels who ministered to Jesus. Most biblical scholars will tell you that the wild animals were the forces of the demonic, the forces that threaten life, and that the angels are God's messengers sent to strengthen Jesus in his time of testing. At the risk of muddying that up, I would like to suggest something else. Maybe Eugene Peterson, in his dynamic translation *The Message*, is on to something. Maybe the wild animals weren't the forces of the demonic after all, but companions of Jesus. Maybe it was hard to tell who was the wild animal, and who was the angel, for Jesus. Maybe that was his temptation.

That could be the case, you know. Sometimes you really can't tell the wild animals for the angels in our lives, in our wildernesses of testing. Sometimes they are the same. Sometimes angels come across as wild animals and it can be easy to dismiss them because we don't agree with them, we don't like how they are presenting their case, we don't want to hear what they have to say. They are telling us something about ourselves that we don't want to hear, but we need to hear it. They are coming across as wild animals because they care about us, because they love us with the love of Jesus, the love that loves us too much to let us get away with brokenness.

When someone comes at me with what seems to be an attack, I know how easy it is to dismiss them as a wild animal. They are just having a bad day. They just misinterpreted what I said. They just don't agree with me, or they don't want to admit that I really do have a point. While any of those things might be true, the temptation exists to just blow someone off as a wild animal and think they don't have anything to give us just because they are trying to teach us something about ourselves we don't want to learn. It could just be that they are really angels in disguise; angels whom we think are wild animals.

I have to be really careful here – but today is my wife's birthday. I'll let her tell you how many candles she will have on her cake, but I'm not that crazy. But I do know from being married to her for over 25 years that she has been both an angel and a wild animal to me. There have been times when she has been aggravatingly correct in pointing out something I didn't want to face; when she has taken some snippy comment I have made and turned it around so that I could look at it from another angle and see that I was saying more about myself than about anyone else; when she has not let me get away with being less than my best. I guess there are times when I have done the same for her, but that's her story to tell. I do know that she has been a wild animal to me in some very angelic ways.

Sometimes it takes the ones we love to show us that we are in the wilderness and we need to find a way out before we start justifying the demonic. We need our angels to be wild animals once in a while because we need the reminder that we are all broken, all sinful, all limited in our understandings.

We also need them for one special reason which Lent teaches us better than any other Christian season. We need them to open up to us opportunities for repentance; opportunities to change direction, and turn around. Lent is the time for us to remember Jesus' time in the wilderness, and to

remember that for many of us we are there, too. But we are not just left there. Just like Jesus had wild animals for companions and angels for ministers, so do we. And sometimes it is hard to tell one from the other. But what they both do is to get us back on the right path, to help us with our time of testing, and to keep us walking on the path God has for us.

So we start our Lenten journey in the wilderness, but we also start it at the table of our Lord. Jesus - who was tempted as we are - leads us to this table in his name, to feed us with what will really get us through the wilderness. When the time of testing is really tough and the way is not clear, we can always come back here and be nourished and re-directed. Lent, you see, is the time for us to get our direction from Jesus – and from the wild animals and angels he sends our way to help us on the journey. Amen.

The Bible text is Mark 1:9-15  
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