1st Sunday in Lent

Gen. 9:8-17 Ps. 25 Mark 1:9-15

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 2-21-21

Perhaps you have noticed that Mark is the only one of the Gospel writers to include wild beasts in his version of Jesus' trial in the wilderness, Mark saying about that experience only five things in two short verses…

1) That the Spirit of God *drove* Jesus into the wilderness immediately after his baptism…
2) That Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days….
3) That Jesus was tempted by Satan…
4) That he was with the wild beasts…
5) And, like Matthew and Luke, that the angels waited on him…

So what it is about the wild beasts? Why did Mark include this detail in his telling of the story, a detail neither Matthew or Luke chose to include despite the fact that they had Mark's Gospel in front of them when they sat down to write their own, and seemed perfectly happy to use much of the rest of Mark's Gospel? What was Mark up to when he says Jesus was with the wild beasts?

There are many scholarly ideas about this… But basically I would say most ideas fall into one of three camps…

One suggests that Jesus had the strength and power to fight those wild beasts off… that in his baptism Jesus had received the power of God necessary to overcome the chaotic, unruly and wild forces of the

world and to send them packing… “As God is all powerful,” this perspective suggests, “so too is Jesus all powerful.”

The second camp has a much different take on the wild beasts, suggesting not that Jesus defeated them, but that God protected Jesus from them in the same kind of way Daniel was protected from the lions in the lion’s den… This interpretation suggesting that the wild beasts were surrounding Jesus all hours of the forty days and forty nights, snarling and chomping at the bit to get at Jesus, but to no avail, as the one whom God had just claimed as his beloved son would not become a mere morsel for some marauding mongoose. No way.

The third option, and the one most scholars like best, suggests that Jesus’ forty-day encounter with the wild animals provides the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy; that beautiful image of the peaceable kingdom in which the wolf would lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, and the child would be able to put his hand over the adder’s den without being harmed…

“This is how you will know the Messiah has arrived,” Isaiah prophesied centuries before… “In his presence the present state of things will be reversed… No more will the wolf or the leopard or the adder be a threat… It will be a new day, a new world… When the one who brings such a reversal comes, you will know the Messiah has arrived.”

This interpretation suggesting that Mark included the wild animals to show that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah in whose presence Isaiah’s image of the peaceable kingdom came to be…

This interpretation of the story seeming quite satisfactory to me for quite a long time…

Until that is, I stumbled upon one little paragraph in an obscure commentary on this text written by Marylin McCord Adams who wrote, *"Mark is using this stark story to preview the rest of the Gospel, in which Jesus **is the wild beast** who refuses to be domesticated into the household of conventional religion. Jesus' disruptive taboo-violating ministry of touching lepers and bleeding women, of healing on the Sabbath, of eating with tax collectors and sinners, turns his earthy career into liminal space and time for all the other Gospel characters. The reader is shown how – like boys refusing to be men – the scribes and the Pharisees and even the twelve disciples resist the transition by refusing to let go of their old identities…Marks' Gospel then, forcing readers to struggle with the tensions of letting go or holding onto their own old identities in the presence of Jesus… Which is exactly where we belong on the first Sunday in Lent…"*

Did you hear the explosive and utterly outlandish suggestion made in this little paragraph that had nothing to do with Jesus defeating the wild beasts, or being protected from the wild beasts, or getting all the beasts to lie down together in peace, but rather with the audacious proposition that **Jesus *was* a wild beast**, and that Mark included the wild beasts in Jesus' forty-day trial because there was something about Jesus' encounter with them that helped to prepare him for declaring the in-breaking of the kingdom of God…

Well, that is a whole other take on the story. And one very much in sync with what comes before it and what comes after it in Mark's

Gospel… But one I can really only begin to understand by going by way of a little story I shared with the St. Brendan congregation on the day we baptized little Oona Virginia the summer before last…

A story told to me by an elderly man at Redeemer Lutheran Church some years ago… A story about something he witnessed while waiting to use the swimming pool at the YMCA in Ellsworth one day. As Lee Smith shared his experience, he told the story this way….

I was waiting for a swimming class for young children to be over when I saw a small boy, maybe five years old or so standing a good distance from the pool, his skinny little legs sticking out from his swimming trunks, his towel tightly wrapped around his body, tears streaming down his face…

He was surrounded by adults trying to get him to go into the water… All of them bringing with them their well-honed tricks of the trade…His mother promising him a trip to Dunkin' Donuts after class if he would just get into the water… one of the swimming instructors promising to go into the pool with him and another promising the boy he could hold onto a floatation device of some sort…

Even a couple of the kids yelling happy words of encouragement as they poked their heads up from the water at the edge of the pool… But nothing could compel the young boy to budge… No promise of reward, no offer of support, no encouraging enticement… So palpable was his fear, so deep his resistance… The grown-ups finally giving up; the swimming instructors going to join the other children in their charge, the boy's mother taking her seat on the bleachers…

But then a woman who had been standing off to the side watching the whole thing walked up to the boy, knelt down, looked into his face, and spoke some words no one could hear… And after a time the little

boy let go of his tight grip on the towel, let it fall to the floor, and walked over to the side of the pool where one of the instructors, amazed at what he had seen, helped the boy into the water.

As Lee Smith told the story, he added that he later found out the woman who had knelt down by the boy and spoken to him was local artist and children's book illustrator Rebekah Raye, who is best known for her paintings of Maine wildlife and for the way those paintings seem to capture not only the color and texture of the animals' feathers and fur and scales, but also the lightness of their bones, the hunger in their stomachs, the wildness in their eyes, the softness of their underbellies, the alertness of their senses, the fear in their hearts, the scars and wounds that tell the stories of their lives…

How did she do it? How did Rebekah Raye get the little boy to go into the water? I can only imagine it had something to do with the careful and rapt attention she had for ever so long given to the hollow lightness of bird bones, to the shimmer of humming bird wings, to the soft fearful underbellies of rabbits… so when she recognized the same quick breath and fear in the little boy, Rebekah knew what to say… **She had paid close enough attention to the deeper things to know the deeper language, otherwise known as love…**

The very same language Jesus recognized in his encounter with the wild animals, because he had heard it before… he had heard it before when, at his baptism, the Spirit of God, ablaze with wild passionate love, **tore open** the heavens (as Mark put it) and declared Jesus to be **beloved**… beloved of the God so wild with love for the world God so loves, this God would do anything to save it from its bondage to fear and violence and despair and death…

This God, who, as Mark told the story, then **possessed** Jesus in the same way Mark spoke of demons possessing others in his Gospel, and then **drove him** into the wilderness, that place as far removed from the religious and political halls of power as possible… the place where the wild things are…

That place where, as Mark suggests, in Jesus' own rite of passage, he looked deep into the inky iridescent eyes of the wild beasts, matched his breathing to their breathing, his heartbeat into their heartbeat until the sinews of their souls melded into one… Until he came to know the deeper language he had first heard spoken at his baptism in the claiming, naming word "beloved"… the language from the depths of the heart of the wild-beast-creator-redeemer God…

I think Marilyn McCord Adams would suggest that Mark included the wild beasts in his story about Jesus forty-day trial in the wilderness because in their presence Jesus learned the language of the God wild with love… The language he would need in a world where the primary threat to the presence and movement of God are not dive-bombing demons or devils that tempt people to do evil things… But rather the well-established, well-organized political and religious systems upon which the world is built…

Such as **the economic policies** of Jesus' day (no different than our own) that benefit the few at the expense of the many… Such as **the religious institutions** of Jesus' day (no different than our own) that equate the religious life with observing certain laws and believing certain things… Such as **the cultural messages** of Jesus' day (no different than our own) that give greater value to some people over others, and marginalize whole groups of people until they are invisible… Such as the **subtle organized forces** of Jesus' day (no different than our

own) that systematize injustice, domesticate God, call it good, and lull us to sleep so we will not raise an eyebrow…

(No wonder one little story about Satan says he was out walking one day with God, and God was talking about how complex and messy and uncontrollable and fiercely beautiful creation had turned out to be, and Satan said, "Just give it to me; I'll organize it for you."

No wonder Thomas Merton said that the Christian faith has replaced all the deserts and wilderness places in its teachings with dude ranches.

No wonder, during the repressive and violent years of the 1980's in Guatemala, public reading of the "Magnificat" was forbidden).

On this first Sunday in Lent, perhaps we are being asked by Mark to consider the outlandish possibility that Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God because the wild beasts had something to teach him… something he needed to learn before he went into a world that would try everything possible to domesticate the presence and movement of God's Spirit…

That something being the language from deep inside the heart of our wild passionate God… the language of love, which when learned and spoken from the depths of its being, comforts those who are **afflicted** by the ways of the world and **afflicts** those who are comfortable with the ways of the world… all for the sake of love… all for the sake of leading us all into the water, into the fullness of life, into the heart of God.

The God who is calling us now in the language of love to look deep into the inky iridescent eyes of the wild beast Jesus, to match our breathing to his breathing, our heartbeat to his heartbeat until the

sinews of our souls meld into one… Until we come to know the deeper language we first heard spoken at our baptisms in the claiming, naming word **“beloved**…**beloved… beloved of God…”** the language from the depths of the heart of our wild-beast-creator-redeemer God who will go to all lengths to make sure this language is heard and felt and known +….

The God, who on this first Sunday in Lent, is calling us to struggle with the tension of holding on to or letting go of our old identities in the presence of Jesus… The God who is calling us even now to let go… to follow Jesus into the water, into the wilderness, into the world, paying close enough attention to the deeper things to learn the deeper language, so we too can be wild with love in the Spirit of God and in the name of the one who teaches us how…