

February 18, 2024  
The First Sunday in Lent  
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada  
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Genesis 9:8-17  
Psalm 25:1-9  
1 Peter 3:18-22  
Mark 1:9-15

The center of today's Gospel can also be the center of our own Lent. Rather than making ourselves miserable or even setting ourselves up for failure by giving things up or by imposing new demands on our lives, Mark invites us to embrace the experience of Jesus as our own. In a startling opening statement, Mark tells us that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, suggesting that Jesus really didn't have a choice. In spite of what we might like to tell ourselves, we don't have much of a choice of our own environment either. We had no choice at all about the circumstances of our birth, and our personalities were pretty much cast in stone a long, long time ago. Likewise, we don't choose our families or our neighbors. We all were pretty much driven by the same Spirit into the life we have, which, let's face it, can sometimes look a lot like a wilderness. The reality is that we live in a wilderness, not much of which is or was of our own choosing. We were driven here just as Jesus was.

Jesus stayed in the wilderness forty days, just like Lent. The wilderness contains temptations. We are all tempted by many things. Mark doesn't identify the temptations that Jesus faced, nor does anyone need to know what temptations we face. We know them, live with them, and beat them down as best as we can. Sometimes – often – that's good enough. Mark also tells us that Jesus spent time with wild beasts, as do we. We generally think of beasts as unpleasant and unpredictable, which probably describes at least a few people in our own lives. Mark doesn't tell us that Jesus battled them or killed them or avoided them; He simply spent time with them. Mark invites us to identify and spend some time with the wild beasts of our own lives, maybe for once without battling them.

But something else is going on here. Unlike other Gospels, where the angels wait until the end of the story to show up, in Mark the angels are always there, always taking care of Jesus. So too, the angels of our lives don't wait until they're needed to show up; they're simply all around us, all the time, spiritually if not physically. We know who they are and what they do for us, but are we aware of their constancy? Do we realize that the angels make the wild beasts tolerable? We're invited this Lent to pay closer attention not only to the beasts who antagonize us, but also to the angels who take care of us.

Lent is so often considered a dreary season, just as the wilderness is considered a dreary place. Temptations get old, tiresome, and dreary, and beasts are, at their best, dreary. It doesn't have to be so. Our first reading on this first Sunday in Lent includes a promise from God, a rainbow, and an eternal covenant. Psalm 25 reminds us that "All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness," even the dusty trails in our own wilderness, as long as we stay in the covenant God offers us (25:9). The first letter of Peter tells us that Christ suffered for one reason: "to bring us to God" (3:18). God is our beginning, our constant present, and, thanks to the suffering of our Lord, our final destination. Like so many destinations, getting there is not half the fun, but it is where we are.

We're invited to take our cue from Mark today and not get bogged down in the unnecessary details of our lives, but rather to accept that this leg of our journey goes through a wilderness where temptation and wild beasts abound, but also where the angels also abound at every moment. We're invited simply to notice our surroundings and accept them for what they are, giving thanks for the presence of God and His holy angels. I can't imagine a simpler or more peaceful Lent.