

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2020
1ST SUNDAY IN LENT
MARK 1:9-15, GENESIS 22:1-18
BATTLES IN THE WILD

OF ALL THE GOSPEL WRITERS, MARK IS THE MOST SUCCINCT IN HIS RETELLING OF THE EVENTS SURROUNDING THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES., AND OUR TEXT FOR TODAY IS NO EXCEPTION. HE DOESN'T WASTE TIME ON DETAILS THAT DON'T SERVE A PURPOSE IN HIS PROCLAMATION OF THE GOOD NEWS. AT ANY RATE, HIS TELLING OF THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS IS MUCH SHORTER THAN THAT OF MATTHEW AND LUKE. HE DOESN'T TELL OF THE ACTUAL CHALLENGES THAT COME IN CONFRONTING THE DEVIL, BUT ONLY THAT HE IS TEMPTED. THE ONLY THING UNIQUE TO MARK'S TELLING OF THIS STORY IS IN VERSES 12 AND 13, AND TRUE TO HIS FORM, THEY ARE SHORT AND TO THE POINT, AND IF WE'RE NOT CAREFUL, WE COULD MISS THEIR SIGNIFICANCE.

AFTER THE SPIRIT DESCENDS UPON JESUS AT HIS BAPTISM, MARK USES THAT WORD HE LIKES BEST, IMMEDIATELY – AND – IMMEDIATELY JESUS IS DRIVEN BY THAT SAME SPIRIT INTO THE WILDERNESS.

IF YOU STUDY YOUR SCRIPTURES, ESPECIALLY THE OLD TESTAMENT, YOU WILL SEE THAT THE WILDERNESS IS THE PLACE WHERE GOD NOT ONLY CALLED PEOPLE, BUT WHERE HE SHAPED THEM. THINK MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH, THINK THE ISRAELITES BEING RE-FORMED IN THEIR WILDERNESS TIME, THINK ABRAHAM IN OUR LESSON THIS MORNING, FACING ONE OF THE TOUGHEST BATTLES OF HIS LIFE, ON A MOUNTAIN, IN THE WILD. FAR FROM BEING A BAD PLACE, IN THE SCRIPTURES, THE WILDERNESS IS A HOLY PLACE WHERE ONE FINDS GOD.

BUT THE WILDERNESS IS ALSO A PLACE WHERE ONE IS CHANGED FOREVER. JUST AS IT CHANGED MOSES WHEN HE ENCOUNTERED GOD, JUST AS ABRAHAM LEARNED OF GOD'S PROVISION, AND JUST AS JESUS LEARNED OF GOD'S LOVE AND CARE, SO EACH ENCOUNTER FOR US WILL CHANGE US.

BECAUSE IN THE WILDERNESS, I CANNOT ESCAPE THE REALITY OF WHO I AM, NOR CAN I ESCAPE THE ONE WHO CALLS ME TO BE SO MUCH MORE THAN WHO I AM. IN THE WILDERNESS, THERE ARE NO DISTRACTIONS, AND I AM LAID BARE AND OPEN TO ALL THE THINGS THAT GOD CALLS ME TO BE.

SO, I DON'T THINK IT'S A COINCIDENCE THAT THE VERY FIRST THING GOD'S SPIRIT DOES WITH JESUS AFTER HIS BAPTISM IS TO DRIVE HIM TO THE WILDERNESS. HE IS LEAD THERE, AFTER HAVING BEEN REASSURED OF THE FATHER'S TREMENDOUS LOVE FOR HIM, TO DISCOVER WHO HE IS. HE IS TEMPTED BY THE THINGS THAT HE MIGHT BE, THAT ARE NOT A PART OF THE CALL GOD HAS FOR HIM.

IN THE WILDERNESS, OUR BATTLE IS MORE ABOUT LEARNING TO LEAN LESS ON OUR OWN SELVES, AND LEARNING TO TRUST MORE ON GOD'S WAY OF BEING AND DOING. IN THE WILDERNESS, WE ARE MORE CONNECTED TO WHAT GOD IS DOING IN THE WORLD, AND IN THE WILDERNESS, WHEN ALL ELSE IS TAKEN AWAY, WE LEARN THE ULTIMATE VALUE OF LOVE.

AND THIS IS THE WAY OF THE CROSS THAT MARK WILL EVENTUALLY LEAD US THROUGH THESE FORTY DAYS BEFORE EASTER. THE DIFFICULT ROAD OF FINDING THE LOVE OF GOD IN ITS ABSENCE – THIS IS THE WAY OF THE CROSS. AND I BELIEVE, THE VERY THING THAT THE SPIRIT LEADS JESUS, AND INDEED LEADS ALL OF US INTO THE WILDERNESS FOR.

THE OTHER VERSE THAT IS UNIQUE TO MARK HAS JESUS DWELLING WITH WILD BEASTS AND ANGELS WAITING ON HIM. AGAIN, MARK DOESN'T GO INTO ANY DETAIL, BUT WE CAN'T IGNORE THESE VERSES, SO WHAT SHOULD WE TAKE FROM THEM?

WILD ANIMALS – SEEM EASY ENOUGH AT FIRST GLANCE – THEY REMIND US THAT THE WILDERNESS IS INDEED A WILD PLACE, BUT NOWHERE IN THE OTHER TEXTS DO YOU SEE JESUS BOTHERED BY OR HAVING ISSUES WITH THEM. WHAT IF THEY ARE A REMINDER OF THE OT IDEA OF A DIFFERENT TIME? OF A TIME WHERE THE WILD BEASTS LIVED IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER (ISAIAH 65)

THE ANGELS WAITING ON JESUS AGAIN TAKE US BACK TO THE OT, AND AGAIN TO WILDERNESS IMAGES. THE FIRST IS THE IMAGE OF JACOB SLEEPING AT A PLACE HE CALLED BETH'EL, THE HOUSE OF GOD, WHERE HE SAW A LADDER , WITH THE ANGELS OF GOD ASCENDING AND DESCENDING. THE PLACE WAS A POINT OF CONTACT WITH THE HEAVENLY. IT WAS WHERE JACOB FIRST DWELT IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

THE OTHER IS THE IMAGE OF THE ANGEL STANDING GUARD OVER THE GARDEN OF EDEN PREVENTING ADAM AND EVE FROM RETURNING.

NOW, IN MARK, WITH JESUS IN THIS "NEW EDEN" THE ANGELS SERVE, NOT ONLY AS THE POINT OF CONTACT, AND NO LONGER GUARD, BUT SERVANT FOR JESUS. AND HOW DO THEY DO THAT? BY DOING JUST WHAT THEIR NAME SUGGESTS – DELIVERING A MESSAGE; REMINDING JESUS OF HIS IDENTITY, PURPOSE AND MISSION. CONSIDERING THEM IN THIS WAY, MAKES US REALIZE THAT THERE ARE MANY ANGELS AVAILABLE TO US DURING OUR OWN PERIODS OF TEMPTATION AND TRIALS AS WELL, IF WE JUST LOOK FOR THEM.

CERTAINLY, WE NEED TO BE HONEST ABOUT THE TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS JESUS FACED IN THE WILDERNESS AND THAT WE FACE IN OUR OWN LIVES. WE ALSO NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE WILD BEASTS THAT SURROUNDED HIM IN THAT DESERT, JUST AS WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE THINGS THAT SCARE THE BEJEEZUS OUT OF US. LENT IS A TIME TO DO THAT.

BUT IT'S ALSO A TIME TO REMEMBER THOSE ANGELS, IN HIS WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE AND IN OURS. TO REMEMBER, AS MARK DOES, THAT THEY WERE THERE FOR HIM FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF HIS 40-DAY JOURNEY, JUST AS GOD HAD BEEN WITH HIS ANCESTORS EVERY DAY OF THEIR 40-YEAR DESERT JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS. JUST AS GOD PROMISES TO BE WITH US IN THE WILD, LONELY PLACES OF OUR LIVES.

LENT CAN BE A TIME TO TAKE STOCK OF OUR LIVES, TO COME CLEAN ABOUT THE THINGS THAT TEMPT US AND THE THINGS THAT SCARE US. PART OF OUR LENTEN DISCIPLINE CAN BE TO ACKNOWLEDGE, IN THE WORDS OF THE OLD PRAYER, "THE HARM WE HAVE DONE AND THE GOOD WE HAVE LEFT UNDONE" --OR IN THE WORDS OF STEP 10 OF EVERY 12-STEP PROGRAM, "TO DO A FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY."

BUT I ALSO INVITE US TO DO ANOTHER LENTEN INVENTORY, AN ACCOUNTING OF THE ANGELS WE HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED AND WHO HAVE LOVED US, BORN THE MESSAGE OF OUR IDENTITY AS GOD'S CHILDREN IN THE WILDERNESS TIMES OF OUR OWN LIVES. TO REMEMBER, AS MARK REMEMBERED, THOSE ANGELS THAT SHOW UP WHEN WE'RE TIRED, THIRSTY AND SURROUNDED BY WILD BEASTS--JUST AS THEY DID FOR JESUS.

OUR WILDERNESS ANGELS PROBABLY DON'T LOOK LIKE WE THINK ANGELS SHOULD. NO LONG WHITE ROBES, NO RUSTLING WINGS. INSTEAD, THEY MAY RESEMBLE THE MIDDLE-SCHOOL TEACHER WHO BELIEVED IN US WHEN WE COULDN'T BELIEVE IN OURSELVES. OR THE COACH WHO GAVE US A CHANCE TO PLAY, EVEN IF WE WEREN'T VERY GOOD. MAYBE ONE OF YOUR ANGELS IS A COLLEAGUE WHO HAD YOUR BACK

DURING A ROUGH TIME AT WORK OR A FRIEND WHO LISTENED TO YOUR FEARS AND GRIEF AFTER A RELATIONSHIP ENDED. SOMETIMES OUR WILDERNESS ANGELS ARE THE PEOPLE WHO ACCEPT OUR APOLOGIES WHEN WE'VE HURT THEM OR OTHERS, THE PEOPLE WHO REMIND US THROUGH THAT ACCEPTANCE THAT, IN THE WORDS OF WILLIAM SLOAN COFFIN, THERE "IS MORE GRACE IN GOD THAN SIN IN US."

AND SOMETIMES OUR ANGELS ARE SIMPLY THE PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO WALK WITH US INTO THE WILDERNESS AND DESERTS OF OUR OWN LIVES AND BE A MUCH-NEEDED HOLY PRESENCE FOR US.

LENT BEGINS WITH JESUS' 40-DAY JOURNEY INTO THE WILDERNESS, WHERE ACCORDING TO MARK, HE WAS "TEMPTED BY SATAN AND WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS." OUR LENTEN JOURNEY ALSO LEADS US INTO SUCH WILDERNESS TIMES AND PLACES, BE THEY IN OUR OWN LIVES OR IN THE WORLD AROUND US. YES, IT CAN BE A HARD JOURNEY FILLED WITH FEARSOME THINGS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH ARE OUR OWN FAILINGS AND THE TIMES WE'VE LET THOSE FEARSOME THINGS GET THE BEST OF US. IN OUR OWN DESERTS OF LENT, WE CAN FEEL BESET BY THE WILD BEASTS OF DESPAIR OR REGRET.

BUT EVEN IN SUCH A TIME, DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE ANGELS IN THE WILDERNESS. MARK DIDN'T. AND NEITHER SHOULD WE.

"HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS FORTY DAYS, TEMPTED BY SATAN, AND HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS, AND THE ANGELS MINISTERED TO HIM."

EVEN IN THE WILDERNESS, ACCORDING TO MARK, THE ANGELS GOT THE LAST WORD. MAY THAT BE TRUE FOR US IN OUR WILDERNESS JOURNEY THIS LENT, TOO. IN THE NAME OF JESUS. AMEN.