

Rev. Dan Welch Text: Matthew 4:1-11 Lent 1 2.22.26

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove Him deep into a dark, dry, fierce, lonely place for battle. In Mark's Gospel we read: "(Jesus) was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild (beasts)" (Mk 1:12). Lent is our season, yours and mine, among the beasts, and that can be very frightening. And it doesn't get much more frightening than the Gospel for today when Jesus had His season among the beasts.

Of course, we could just try to forget all that mess, blissfully looking the other way, except for the scariest fact of all: *by nature, I am the beast and so are you.* This story is **our** story.

Aer you shocked by that? Even kids know it is true. Any number of children's tales make the point, from the brothers Grimm to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. Do you remember Sendak's book about that rambunctious little boy named Max who flees his loving mother and his home for a wild place where he can be the king? Right there in the book, that is you and that is me—Adam's rebellious offspring in the wolf suit with the pointy ears and the whiskers and the little pajama feet with toes. You and I are Max, running hard against the One who loves us most of all.

Never quite happy with our lot in life, our home, our grace, our God, and always so sure that we can have a better Eden, a better Paradise, on our own. By nature, we are wild things always making mischief of some kind or another. And **that** really is the scariest fact of all: left to myself, in my heart of hearts, I **prefer** the wild things. In my heart of hearts, I **am** the beast.

This is not the way it was **meant** to be. Creation, you, and I were never meant for such disaster. Mutiny was not meant to be our destiny. But Satan's word has had its beguiling way with us since Adam: "Did God really say . . .?" (Gen 3:1).

Once broken, we are very much unable to fix ourselves. Dead men can't bring themselves to life. But they can be enlivened. The antidote for all of this comes from far outside of us. It comes by way of Christmas, Epiphany, and the baptism of Jesus.

At His baptism, Jesus is named Son, anointed Suffering Servant, and then sent to an atoning death at the cross, once for all. At our Baptism, our absolution, and our eating at His table, Jesus gives us His cross and all its merit to us for free, forgiving us. All that He is, all that He has- Son, Savior, Messiah, King, cross, name, body, blood, forgiveness, life, salvation, and everything else that is good- all that is ours as a gracious gift. And that means, I am the beast-forgiven- and so are you.

Despite that grace applied to me, from time to time I'm in danger as I long for places where I would still be king. Sometimes I would much rather be strong, wild, and free than forgiven, obedient, and a servant. When I am there, when I am that, then I am in the wilderness, and a great danger meets me face-to-face: me. It is true for you as well. There the tempter's alluring and beguiling "Did God really say . . .?" also begs to have its way with us, doubling the danger.

It is for days like these that Lent was made, **our** season with the beasts. There's really no sense in ignoring the mess. After all, the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh won't go away unless their driven away and speared.

So, once a year we break out the sackcloth and ashes and try to say at least one honest thing: "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Admittedly those are strong words of finger-wagging Law, the kind that's meant to crush us, hurt us, and stop us dead in our tracks. But you need that, and I do too.

Even those who should know better; people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David; people like you and me, we all tend to wander, enchanted by the wild lands where we can pretend, at least for a little while, that we are kings; that we are in charge.

So, once a year we pause for 40 days and 40 nights, Ash Wednesday until Easter, graciously led by the Spirit on our **own** little exodus, fleeing **our** beasts, wildernesses, selves, and Satan for the Promised Land.

So, shall we go again this year? Yes. And why? Because the Father gives to us His only Son, and then everything else as we have need (Rom 8:32). He means to give us all that He has if only we will have it, **if only we will have it.**

And suddenly, Lent is not only finger-wagging Law, not only 40 days of hellish wilderness, but also quarantine, which comes from the Latin word for "40". Lent is 40 days of isolation set aside for our redemption and our healing in a toxic world.

But it turns out that even during Lent, the default mode of the church is joy. Do the math. Even Lent doesn't consider Sundays to be within its grasp. From Ash Wednesday to Easter is really 46 days, 40 normal days plus 6 Sunday feasts of resurrection- for you, for me, the small, the lost, the last, the rebellious, the beastly, and the dead, now raised up by the grace of God applied to us personally through His Means of Grace.

Of course, it is not always easy. Jesus spent a lifetime being tempted and punished because He was baptized. It starts today in the wilderness with Satan urging Him to be a devilish sort of king, well-fed, popular, and cross-less. Rebuking that, Jesus held to what had been done and said in the Jordan

because man really does not live by bread alone, nor fame, nor power, but only by the words proceeding from God's mouth.

If Jesus skips the cross, then there is no gracious God, and nobody gets saved. The universe collapses in upon itself, and all is lost. But He did not flinch or skip or run away, and all that was done there on Calvary was done **for you** and me.

If Jesus spent a lifetime being tempted and punished because He got baptized, you and I shouldn't expect anything different. After all, you were baptized not only into His life, but also into His suffering, cross, and death. It's not that we're spared the wilderness as Christians, but rather that in the midst of wilderness and temptation Jesus speaks a stronger word of comfort: "Come what may, all is well. You are safe. You are mine. Forever" (Rom 6:1-6).

In our most honest moments, we know that we are not kings. Scroll through the news on your phone, go home and read the Sunday papers. Of ourselves we human beings are beasts, and left to ourselves we will certainly die, not only **disappointed**, but also **undone** forever.

But there **is hope!** There is hope, as Max discovered too, on the day that he was drawn out of his life as king among the wild things and pulled back home to a place where someone loved him best of all, where supper was waiting for him, still hot. And at every communion service the Supper waits for **you**.

At the end of the temptation passage in Mark chapter 1 we read the angels came and cared for Jesus (Mk 1:13). And **we** are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ who loved us (Rom 8:37). Amen.