

Sunday, February 21, 2021

Sermon: Lent 1 – Taming the Wild Beasts

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent and you may have noticed something a little weird in the passage, well, a lot of things weird happen in these passages (Mark 1:9-15). A lot of weird things happen in the Bible but in our passage it starts off saying that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. That's kind of an interesting phrase, isn't it? Why would the Spirit have to drive Jesus into the wilderness? The word that often gets translated as 'drove' Jesus into the wilderness in Greek means to cast out. It's as if the Spirit forcibly pushes Jesus out into the wilderness and that may sound strange to you because why does the Spirit have to force Jesus to do anything? Shouldn't Jesus just do what the Spirit wants Jesus to do? I don't know for sure, but apparently Jesus may not have wanted to go into the desert or into the wilderness to be tested. I don't want to go into the wilderness to be tested. Do you want to go into the wilderness to be tested? I kind of doubt it. The wilderness is not a fun place, but even Jesus had to be pushed and sometimes you don't have to be pushed to go out into the wilderness of life. Sometimes the wilderness finds you. You don't have to go too far to find the wilderness these days.

If you're like me, the wilderness is brought to you and we're in the wilderness. It's hard we have had one prayer already that hit me pretty deep which was, "I've lost friends who have a different political stance." That hits me hard, too. It's difficult. I feel like I've lost family members. I've lost friends and it's hard. That is part of the wilderness experience that we are in.

It just so happens that a few weeks ago one of our beloved members, Suzanne, sent me a link from the Oregonian about two people from the Portland area who have dramatically different political views but have remained friends. This is hard for me to bring up. I will tell you why, but one of these friends is Dave Dahl who created who creates the most amazing bread I eat. This the Good Seed from Dave's Killer Bread. I've been eating it every morning for breakfast for the last six or seven years. It's my favorite bread, but when Suzanne sent me this reflection from these two friends I started feeling guilty for eating such wonderful, beautiful, bread sent from Heaven.

These two Portlanders, Dave Dahl and author, Jathan Janove, were wondering how to keep their friendship intact. Dave enthusiastically supported Donald Trump's reelection campaign and watches Fox News. Can I still eat his bread? Jathan couldn't imagine a candidate he'd be less likely to support and he reveres the New York Times. These are the two friends. The article goes on and says how their friendship continues. This may help you. They have three steps for how to continue their friendship: 1) Agree to either not talk about politics, or to do it with a curiosity paradigm. If you're going to talk about politics, be curious. Dave can explore why Jathan feels the way he does as long as the purpose is to understand, not advocate or pontificate. Curiosity is the only criterion and a non-negotiable rule. 2) Seek out shared causes. Both Dave and Jathan are passionate about second-chance employment so they work together to help provide opportunities for those who are formally incarcerated. You might be surprised to learn that, Dave, this wealthy man who created this bread company and is very right of

center makes charitable gifts that disproportionately benefit poor people of color. 3) Find things in common even if from different perspectives. They both support training police on ways to de-escalate tense situations without force or threat of force. They say that if we could find ways to work together with people on opposite sides of the political spectrum that the world would be a better place. They conclude by saying that if we want our country to heal, grow, and prosper, it behooves us to identify shared values and find ways of collaborating, skip the debate. They say figure out how, by working together, we can make the world a better place.

Now, when Suzanne sent this to me as I told you, I read it and when Suzanne sent it to me, her email said, "I love this!" And when I read it I thought, "I love it, too, kind-of." It's hard. I am in my wilderness experience and maybe you are at this place, too, where there's just something inside of me that cringes when I think of trying to work with someone who thinks about politics and religion differently than I do. There's something inside of me that just cringes and maybe you are experiencing that, too. I think it's a good example of how we might be able to move forward. Dave and Jathan provide almost a blueprint for what we might be able to do going into the future. It still makes me cringe. That's part of my humanity and it might be part of your humanity, too. And maybe it was part of Jesus's humanity. I don't know. Maybe we all need to get through, maybe even Jesus needs to get through. Maybe that's part of the wilderness experience that we are having in our world, especially here in the United States, the wilderness of what to do with this political divide. And maybe it's not as divided as we are telling ourselves it is. But it's divided inside of me.

I have family members that I've almost stopped talking to because I can't believe that they think this way. Ahhh, it's so hard. So here on this first Sunday of Lent, we have this story of Jesus being thrown out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan to where he is with the wild beasts and where the angels come and minister to him. One of the interesting things about this story that you may not get on the first reading is this whole relationship of Satan. We usually think of Satan as the adversary or the tempter. It is those things, but Satan has a much more important thing that we often miss. In the Bible, the original language of the Hebrew Testament, what we call the Old Testament, Satan's name means accuser. Satan is the accuser, so when Jesus goes out into the wilderness he's tempted by Satan.

The Gospel of Mark doesn't give us anything more than a verse or two of Jesus going out into the wilderness. The Spirit drove him out there and he was tempted by Satan. The other Gospels give us much more of an elaborate story, but Mark just says that he's being tempted by Satan. What is he being tempted by Satan to do? In the Gospel of Mark, we aren't told, but I'm going to tell you this - Satan is the one who tempts us, to divide the world up by accusing one another. It's the principle of accusation. Jesus was tempted in his wilderness experience to live a life of blaming others. He was tempted in his wilderness experience to rule the world not through love, but by uniting his people in accusation over and against their enemies. And I have to tell you that is such a temptation. I am often tempted to do that, too.

Jesus was tempted to accuse, to lead a movement over and against real or perceived enemies. And when Jesus goes out into the wilderness he resists that temptation. Maybe that is the wilderness experience that we are having. Please understand what I am saying, I am not saying that we stop

struggling for a more just and loving world. We don't stop saying that some people mess up, some people are blocking our way towards that. I'm not saying to stop trying to create good policies, good ways of life that help one another. I'm not saying to get along just to get along. Jesus didn't live that in his life. He worked for a more just world, but as he did it he reminded us and his listeners to love even those that we call our enemies as we love ourselves. To love, that is what the life of God is about. The life of God that Lent is here to do. When Jesus is out in the wilderness he has to get rid of the things that are tempting him to make these accusations. He has to train himself to not listen to that voice within his culture, maybe even within himself. He has to train himself to resist the temptation to accuse the voice of the accuser so that he can train himself to listen to the voice of God that came to him and said you are my beloved child, you are loved, live into that love.

Isn't that one of the temptations that we have throughout our culture? I'm trained to not believe that I'm loved. I'm trained that in order to earn love from friends, from our culture, that I have to be successful. That we have to have a certain amount of money. That we have to have success in our job or whatever and then I can earn success, then I can call myself loved if I have the adoration of other people and if I'm finally successful. These are the things that Jesus has to resist in the wilderness experience, too. Why? Because the adoration of others isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it can get us trapped into having to keep earning that kind of love and not just receiving the love that you already have that God gives you and that we live into with one another. You see this can infect the church, too. And this is part of what we need to deconstruct from part of what church has taught all of us, that you have to be good enough, you have to be righteous enough, you have to follow these rules in order for God to love you. If you have heard that story - I see it all the time with our LGBTQIA siblings - that you have to change something about yourself in order to be loved. That's garbage. That's false. That is the voice of the accuser, the Satan, in the wilderness saying that you have to change something about yourself in order to be loved. Whereas the voice of God comes to you and says that you are my beloved child, I am already well pleased with you just as you are and just as you are becoming. It is our role, our spiritual wilderness, it's our spiritual journey to get caught up together in the life of the God who is love, so that we may share that love with one another and with the world not by demonizing others, not by accusing others, not by labeling them as less than human, but by working for a world where all people live in abundance, live in love, live with what they need, that is the journey that Jesus will lead us on during Lent when Jesus feeds the five thousand because they are loved. When Jesus cures the sick, not because they so much deserve it because they've been good, but because they deserve it because they're human, because God loves them and we are called to love one another, too. When Jesus says at the end of our passage that he goes into the region of Galilee and he preaches the good news which is repent and believe in the good news. The word repent is not to say that you've been really bad and so you need to change your behavior. Repent means to change your mind and what is Jesus trying to change our mind about? The word is metanoia which means to change your mind. What is Jesus trying to change our mind about? God is not out to get you. When you're in the wilderness experience, you're not alone, the wild beasts are there. Sometimes I'm a wild beast. You might find yourself as a wild beast and those wild beasts need to be tamed. That's part of the wilderness experience, too. The wild beasts are inside of me. Just as I hear Satan sometimes say, "accuse people – it's easy to do." Sometimes the wild beasts inside of us get in the way of loving our

neighbor as we love ourselves and the angels are there with us in the wilderness experience helping us, reminding us to know that we are loved.

I have angels in my life - Jeff, Blue, Dawn my dear friend, and all of you watching this. We are here to be angels to one another. The Greek word for angels can also mean messenger of God, flesh and blood messengers, and that's what we are. That's what we're here to do, to remind ourselves during these difficult times of deconstruction of wilderness that you are loved during this Lenten season and throughout your life. And when Paul said that nothing in this world, neither life, nor death, can separate us from the love of God.

So friends, may we continue our Lenten journey together. May we know that we are loved just as we are and that you don't have to deserve it. And may we seek, as painful as it often is, friendship in new ways with one another and even with those who are on the other side of the political divide. And may we continue to work for a more just and loving world with one another. Amen