

Lent 1B: Mark 1:9-15
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
February 18, 2024

Where the Wild Things Are

The Divine Comedy, a 14th century poem by Dante Alighieri, has long been considered the greatest work of Western literature. The first part, entitled *Inferno*, opens with the memorable line, “In the middle of life’s journey, I lost my way in a dark wood.” We don’t know what led Dante to the dark wood, but the first creatures he encounters there are strange, terrible, and frightening wild beasts: a leopard, a wolf, and a lion. Readers of *Inferno* have long wondered what is the significance of these beasts. Are they meant to be symbols for something? Are they a kind of foreshadowing, or even a warning, of even more frightening things to come? Perhaps. Dante *is* journeying to *hell*, a world full of chaos and danger.

So far as I know, the beasts that appear at the beginning of Dante’s poem have never been linked with Jesus’ temptation, but I see a connection. Mark’s account of the temptation, you know, is distinct from Matthew’s and Luke’s, not only for not giving any hint of the particulars of Jesus’ temptation—no turning stones into bread or jumping off buildings into the arms of angels—but also for the curious mention of “wild beasts” being with Jesus in the wilderness. Now, on the one hand, the presence of wild beasts shouldn’t surprise us—the *wilderness is* where *wild* things are. But I think there’s more to their presence than that. The beasts are, I believe, Mark’s way of characterizing the temptations Jesus faced. The temptations came upon Jesus ...*like wild beasts*.

The way Mark sets up the story, Jesus is still dripping wet from his dip in the Jordan when he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Actually, Mark says the Holy Spirit *threw him out*, like a bouncer hurling a rowdy customer out of a bar. So, in the matter of a few words, Jesus goes from receiving his Father’s blessing to being exiled, isolated, left out in the wilderness, in the Judean desert, far from civilization, without any resources or supplies.

My son Brendan and I sometimes like to watch TV shows like *Survivor* and *Man vs. Wild*, which showcase specially-trained survivalists who use their skills to find water, build shelters and find their way in the wilderness. That’s *not* what Jesus is doing here. Jesus did not go to the wilderness with any survival training or with any tools or equipment like these survivalists have—no knife or ax or fire-starting tools. Jesus is “roughing it” in a very real way, on his own, all alone.

Well, not exactly all alone. There are the wild beasts. The intense daytime temperatures and energy-sapping sun were bad enough, but at night...night is when the animals come out. Wolves and jackals and lions, creatures with claws and fangs and fearsome cries that turn your blood to ice. But even scarier than these animals are the “wild beasts” that live in our imaginations, in our heads.

Another survival show I’ve seen is *Alone*, a reality show where contestants are each dropped in various wilderness areas around the world, with only a few items and no help. Whoever can last

the longest, without requesting rescue, wins. What is interesting, indeed instructive is the fact that, although finding food and water and shelter is difficult, the hardest part is being alone all that time, with no one to talk to. It is this psychological struggle that do most of the contestants in, not the physical rigors.

This makes sense to me, because when you are alone, alone for that long, 60 days most seasons, away from the supports and distractions of society—no computers, no video games, no reading material, no TV, no artificial noise—you quickly find yourself face-to-face with the “beasts” that lurk inside you, that you’ve been ignoring. In the wilderness, you see, there’s nothing to protect you from the elements, nor is there anything to protect you from yourself.

All of us have these “beasts” that snarl and scratch inside us. We might identify them with the voices in our heads, our “inner demons,” the negative “self-talk” that tells us we are ugly or unworthy or unloved, that we can never be forgiven, that we don’t deserve to be happy. Or else we might see them as actual demons, evil spirits that haunt empty places like the wilderness, seeking to corrupt and destroy anyone crazy enough to go there. Either way, in the wilderness, such “beasts” quickly make themselves known. They lurk, pacing back and forth like caged animals, waiting to attack, waiting for when our defenses are their weakest. As 1 Peter says of Satan himself, he “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom to devour,” just looking to get us.

Talking about the “wild beasts” this way, I think of the scene from the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* movie, the one where all the wicked creatures, the minions of the evil witch, are dancing around the captured Aslan. In the mob, you see not just animals like wolves and vultures, but hulking minotaurs, pig-headed goblins, cyclops, hags, and some creature that looks like a cross between a man and a pterodactyl. Nasty critters. Truly evocative of the menace that the “wild beasts” of our minds present.

As much as we try to keep away from such creatures, fending them off with noise and distractions, there are times for each of us when they nevertheless show up, moments when our faith falters, dark nights when despair gnaws at us, days in the noontide heat when hopelessness extends its claws to destroy our confidence. When such “beasts” show up, we are sorely tempted to give into fear, to run away. The temptation to do just that was, we imagine, something Jesus must have struggled with.

Then again, maybe fear wasn’t a particular concern for Jesus then. Maybe because he just received God’s blessing, Jesus knew that God would not let him come to harm, not before his work was done. And the work, *that* was what he came to do, right? God’s work. And what work he had ahead of him! God had tasked him to take on the powers-that-be, to challenge the ruling authorities, and to establish a new society, a new politics, a new Kingdom on earth. People will surely recognize how much better it will be under God’s rule than under the Caesars and Herods of this world. And if they don’t, if they reject him, if they refuse to get with the program, well, Jesus as the Son of God had the power to make them. That was another temptation Jesus must have faced—the temptation to rule as others ruled, to use his power to take power from others, to use violence and the threat of violence to get people to comply, smiting the enemies of God, in order to accomplish the work his Father gave him.

Scripture is not naïve about the threat such arrogant and violent rulers presented. The biblical authors liken such rulers to...*wild animals*: the “den of lions” Daniel was thrown into, symbolic of the dangers of working in the king’s court; the lion-human-bear-dragon creature of Daniel’s dream which destroys everything in its way, representative of the Persian Empire; the wicked Jewish leaders that Ezekiel likens to wolves and lions who devour their own people; and later, in the book of Revelation, you have the great “beast,” the ten-headed leopard-bear-lion monster, representing the Roman Empire, which makes war against believers. Throughout the Bible, when powerful men abuse their power, they are shown to be debasing themselves, lowering themselves, becoming no better than animals, beasts. Indeed, the danger of abusing power is not that you would be devoured by the wild beasts but that you would become one.

Surely, Jesus understood this. But he could argue that his rule would be different. He would do it the right way. He would use his power for just and good ends. He would wield the rod with righteousness. And maybe he would. But would that be God’s will?

In T. S. Eliot’s play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, the tempter comes to Thomas Becket, who is condemned to death, and tempts him with the prospect of being a martyr, a religious hero. But Becket sees through it. “The last temptation,” he says, “is the greatest treason; To do the right deed for the wrong reason.” To do the right deed for the wrong reason—this is surely something Jesus was tempted to do—to let the ends justify the means, to use his power to manipulate, coerce, and compel others to submit to his rule, to force the Kingdom on them.

Sure, manipulation and coercion would be easier, more efficient than having to do the hard work of winning hearts and minds, disciplining followers, and building a community that would be an alternative to worldly empires. That takes time, effort, patience. And inevitably some people won’t accept it. Using his power to overrule others’ wills would be easier...but would it be right? That was a question Jesus confronted, I suspect, not just in the wilderness, but whenever people couldn’t get what he was teaching, or they distorted his words, or lied about what he had said to get him arrested. The temptation to say, “Fine. I tried to do it the nice way, the way that honored your dignity and respected your autonomy, but now I’m bringing heaven to earth, whether you like it or not!” This, or something like it, has been the conceit dictators and utopian engineers throughout history, men who were convinced of their vision for the world, even if it cost the deaths of millions—Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, Robespierre of the French Revolution—men who became not just wild beasts, but monsters. Jesus may not have known these men, but he knew where giving into temptation would lead.

And so we see how the portrayal of temptations as “wild beasts” is not just evocative but instructive. It warns us about how temptations stalk us like predators and try to get us to become like them, beasts ourselves.

Having said that, there is, I need to acknowledge, another way to interpret the “wild beasts” at Jesus’ temptation. Some scholars suggest that the “wild beasts” should not be seen as a danger, but as a sign of the Kingdom of God. They see their presence as a fulfillment of the promise of Isaiah 11: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together.” If this is what is intended, then what Jesus

does in the wilderness, we understand, is he *domesticates* the wild animals. He *tames* the wild beasts. They are no longer a threat to him, or to us. The peace of Eden is restored.

Or to take it deeper, symbolically, Jesus is bringing to heel the wild beasts, not only the beasts of the wilderness or the “beasts” in our mind, but the “wild beasts” of the world, the forces of chaos that fight against God. Jesus wrangles these once-wild powers and principalities and bridles them to God’s service, bringing order to the disordered world.

Now, maybe this all seems like a little much to you, too big a claim to make from just a single obscure reference. But you can see how it all works—Jesus goes out into the wilderness, not simply to wrestle with his inner demons, but with the Devil himself, and in the process he pacifies the wild beasts, the chaotic forces in the world, and brings them under his good and peaceful and just rule, transforming these “beasts” into “angels,” messengers and ministers of God. “And he was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.”

To be sure, this is not the end of Jesus’ temptations or his work of subduing wild beasts. He’ll be doing that for the rest of his ministry. He will be tested by the popularity and the criticism of the crowds, by the political establishment, and by his own followers. He will be tempted to give into fear, and to choose what is easiest over what is right. Even on the cross, he will question if God has not in fact abandoned him. And so, as in Dante’s *Inferno*, the “beasts” Jesus faces in the wilderness are just a preview of the struggles and testing that await him. But here, now, Jesus has passed the test, he has planted his flag, he has started his campaign, begun the taming of wild beasts.

In this brief little story, we see Jesus is able to turn temptation into trust, wild animals into angels, the desert into a place of solace. And in a few weeks, we will see an even greater miracle, his turning a shameful death into a glorious triumph. But the journey to the cross begins here in the wilderness, among the wild beasts. And so our Lenten journey must begin here too, in the wilderness, where the wild things are, where we learn to trust in God. And thanks be to God, Jesus is there, too, to show us the way. Amen.