

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
February 18, 2024 – The First Sunday of Lent

Wild Beasts

He was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

I remember when I was in seminary, Maggie and I saw the movie, “Grizzly Man.” Maybe some of you have seen it? It’s directed by the great German filmmaker Werner Herzog. And it’s about a man named Timothy Treadwell, who goes out into the Alaskan wilderness to live among grizzly bears. He’s with the wild beasts, camped out in a tent, not just for 40 days, but for whole summers, ten of them. During his time in the wilderness, he films them. He gets close enough to touch the bears, even pet them. He has names for them. Treadwell believes he really understands the bears on a deeper level and that even though they seem threatening, he knows how to gain their trust. Treadwell has very lofty ambitions for conservation, and he uses these summer experiences and the film footage to advocate for bears the rest of the year. Nevermind that most of the bear experts say he’s actually putting himself at great risk, and he’s putting other people at risk because through all the interactions the bears are becoming habituated to humans, losing their fear.

Treadwell spends the summer of 2003 in the same place he’s gone so many times before: Katmai National Park in Alaska. He brings all his film equipment, and like in years past, the nature photography is just stunning. This last year he also brings his girlfriend along. Now for some reason, and no one really knows why, at the end of this summer, he doesn’t leave. He stays through September and into the early part of October. And the problem with this is that as the weather gets colder, as hibernation gets nearer, the bears get hungrier. And the wild berries are gone, and the salmon run is over and there is not a lot to eat. I hate it when people tell me the end of a movie I might watch so I won’t give away what happens. It’s not a happy ending. Welcome to Lent.

On the first Sunday of Lent we always follow Jesus out into the wilderness for the temptation story, told either through the lens of Mathew, Mark or Luke. This year we hold up Mark’s very version. Luke and Matthew give us much more detail and dialogue and separate dramatic scenes. Satan takes Jesus to these different places, like on top of the Temple to show him the whole world could be his. Satan tempts Jesus very specifically; Jesus fends him off with verses from Holy Scripture until finally Satan leaves. In contrast, this is the whole temptation story in Mark: After his baptism, *“the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was there forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

Something happened in his baptism, something spiritually upending, shattering. When Jesus came up out of the water Jesus saw the heavens rip open, the Spirit descend upon him, and hears

the voice of God, just Jesus, “You are my beloved Son.” And this same Spirit drives him out into the wilderness. And then we’re not told much more. Satan tempts him, angels wait on him, and he is with the wild beasts. Mark is the only gospel which has any mention of the beasts.

Many scholars comment on how with this one line, Mark is intentionally reaching back into Israel’s past and invoking the mythic creation story (stories) of creation. [Stories plural there are 2 of them in Genesis 1 and 2). Mark is intentionally contrasting the old Adam, the old prototypical human, with the new Adam, the new model for humanity, who is Jesus. In the creation myth, Adam was alone in the wild, natural garden, out there with the birds and the wild beasts. Adam (along with Eve) were tempted by Satan in the form of coiled and venomous wild beast, and they succumb to the temptation and eat the fruit. Consequently, they are cast out of the garden. And God puts an angel at the entrance to the garden with a flaming sword, so that they may never return.

The new Adam, Jesus, the new model for humanity, is different. stays the course. The new Adam is not going to succumb to temptation and then go hide when he’s caught, deflecting blame “the woman made me do it.” This new Adam is not put in his place by an angel with a sword, rather the angels are subservient to him, they wait on him, they minister to him. In Lent, we follow Jesus, the new Adam, into the wilderness; we go together into the wild dark places in the world and in our own hearts.

Between the long confession on Ash Wednesday and all these different petitions in the Great Litany, we name parts of us that we can not tame. We name the wild beasts in our world, the wild beasts in our own hearts. What are the particular creatures that scratch at the door for you? If you think about your life right now, what is hissing in the weeds of your own soul? Pride, vanity and hypocrisy; envy, hatred, malice; dishonesty in daily life and work, blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty.

The point of Lent is not to heap shame. The point of Lent is not to stoke the already-white hot flames of inadequacy that so many people already feel. Pastors know that it’s the people who are already much too aware of their own shortcomings who usually take to heart a message about human sin. And then the people who are maybe less morally sensitive are like, “Preach it, pastor. These people need to shape up.” I’m very aware of these dynamics. And they are magnified if you grew up in a religious tradition that was built on making you feel perpetually sinful, with God perpetually angry, so the church could conveniently step in and provide the grace you need to avoid the wrath.

I just don’t think God is filled with anger at you or me. There is no universe I can imagine in which somehow God needs your repentance to be OK, to calm down. God has everything God could ever want or need already because God is God. I believe the large arc of Scripture teaches us that we are all God’s beloved, made in his image, like the way you can see the face of the

mother when you look at her daughter. And like children we sometimes do dumb things. God looks at us the way a parent would look at a child who brings home a baby racoon and says, "Look mama, a puppy." "No, no, honey, that is not a puppy." In Lent we are giving the opportunity to wake us up to the ways that we might be cozy and comfortable with things that are dangerous for us, dangerous for others.

We mock Timothy Treadwell for pitching his tent among the bears, but in some ways, we're all Grizzly Man. We all think we can set up camp in the midst of our wild beasts and come out unscathed. "Oh, I'll just cozy up to this little bit of hatred, just for this one person, or this one group of people. It's harmless. Contained." Or "It's just a little dishonesty. Kind of innocent really. Maybe even a little adorable. Don't worry, I have a really good grasp on when it's dangerous and when it's not." Or "I'm just going to nestle down into this indifference, I'm just going to numb out for a little while. I'm zipping up the sleeping bag over my head, just for a few weeks, OK, maybe a few months, OK, maybe this feels really good and I'll tuck in a little longer."

The good news is that Christ is with us in the midst of the wild beasts in our own hearts and the wild beasts of the world. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who does not heap shame, but who is there to stand between us and the wolves. The grace of Christ flows through many places - especially in a Christian community. No matter how injured we have been by our own sin, no matter what we have let loose in the world to hurt others, no matter the claw-marks and the bite-wounds, there is always the possibility of healing, of new beginnings, new life. Let this deeper healing begin for you today, as we follow Christ into this wilderness together.