

First Sunday in Lent February 21, 2021
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

[Ideas and quote from Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus for this date (posted on February 14, 2021) and titled Beasts and Angels.]

Let us pray, may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts

be acceptable in your sight,

O God, our healer, our redeemer. Amen.

Did today's gospel sound familiar to anyone?

Did you wonder, Goodness, I could have sworn we heard this passage not so long ago?

Maybe Pastor Jen is just a little confused, we'll give her the benefit of the doubt.

Maybe we're all just a little confused, that new word "Blursday" rings close to home.

Friends, it is true:

The days and weeks are certainly blurring—

this is our 50th Sunday worshipping at a distance.

And it's also true that this is the correct passage for today, the first Sunday of Lent.

Today's reading includes a portion of the gospel we heard on

Baptism of Jesus Sunday back in earlier January.

And another portion we heard later that month.

Then, right in the middle, are just two verses that are fresh to our ears.

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;

And he was with the wild beasts;

And the angels waited on him."

Every year we start Lent hearing some rendition of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Mark's version that we hear today is the briefest, lacking details or distraction.

Sometimes we read this Gospel and Jesus becomes something of a superhero,

strong and stoic, deflecting everything that comes his way,

able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

I tease, but I'm not convinced *that* read is the only way, or even the best way, to get at this passage.

As we journey to the cross, Lent isn't so much for muscly superheroes, divine or not.

Rather, Lent draws us into vulnerability, Jesus' vulnerability, and ours.

Lent takes us on paths filled with twists and turns,

into wrestling with our temptations, our demons,

into clarifying our certainties (when all is shaken, what do we trust?).

Lent invites us into humility, into confession.

Debie Thomas writes,

"We need to know that [Jesus] wrestled with real demons and real dangers

during those forty days of temptation.

As alluring as it might be to cling to a divine superhero,

we need the Jesus who endured a terrain

where the Holy Spirit, Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels resided *together*."

She goes on, "Alone, we'll never survive such a dangerous place.

With a companion who knows the way... we will."

Jesus' experience of temptation and wilderness

can teach us a thing or two about how to face these times in our lives.

Did you notice how Jesus doesn't choose to head for the wilderness?

Rather Jesus is driven there, compelled there, by the Spirit of God.

Honestly, there is comfort in this reality.

Rarely do we choose to enter into pain or loss or grief.

We don't choose to go through a dry spell in our faith, or a mental health crisis, or a broken relationship.

Yet there is power in knowing that Jesus has been there,

that God works life even when all I can see is death and despair.

Did you notice how Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days?

I can be impatient with the best of them.

I love a solution that is quick and efficient.

This passage reminds us that sometimes the wilderness lasts a while, sometimes a long while.

The gospel this morning began with Jesus' baptism, with the heavens torn open and that promise:

"You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This promise doesn't protect us from painful time, but it can change how we experience these times.

Here's the thing, dear ones: We can be loved and claimed by God AND, still, at once, face the wilderness.

It's unnerving to realize this, and yet it's ultimately, I believe, good news, very good news.

And did you notice the angels that minister to Jesus in the wilderness?

God's angels, God's agents show up.

They linger close to him with comfort, support, with sustenance.

They may not take the form we expect, or even act as we'd wish, but God's messengers abide.

Sometimes it's these angels that minister to us.

Sometimes we are the angels ministering to another.

God's messengers abide.

Our Lenten focus this year at Hope is Healing and Renewal.

As I've mentioned this focus to many of you, people have responded,

“Oh, that's good, that's just what we need.”

The weariness, the pain, it's palpable these days.

Something about coming up on one year mark, nearing 500,000 losses in this country alone,

something about the brutal divisions,

something about grief... at every level,

something about the tail end of a long winter.

We invite you into this season of healing and renewal.

I am so grateful for the beautiful and honest way that Ann Lee shared her testimony this morning.

Each Sunday we'll hear from someone in this faith community

sharing about their experience of healing and renewal.

Sometimes it'll be someone in the midst of healing, other times it'll be a healing practitioner.

In most cases it won't be neat and tidy healing, but rather some honest reflection,

some powerful experiences,

and the real claim of God's grace, Jesus' steady presence, on our lives, especially in the wilderness.

Thanks to Ann, and the others who have agreed to share.

People of God, may Jesus be our guide along the way.

May the holy angels minister in our need

May you know, deep in your bones,

that you are loved by God,

and empowered for healing, for renewal,

in this season and every season. Amen.