

“And He Was With the Wild Beasts”

Mark 1:9-15; Genesis 9:8-17

Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The Sermon

What do you suppose is God’s intention for you?

In one of the most primeval stories known among the peoples and cultures of humankind, there was, in an inconceivably ancient time, a spectacular, devastating, all-encompassing flood.

The Noah’s Ark narrative is a story of salvation and covenant. God saved the only remaining human representatives of righteousness.

And after the flood came a covenant promise from the Creator: I will never again send a flood to destroy all living creatures.

God makes it clear in three consecutive sentences:

“I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature...

“When the bow is in the clouds, I will remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth...

“This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The message is resounding and unambiguous: God loves every living creature, and expresses it in an eternal, covenantal promise.

With that in mind, how do you think God regards you? What do you imagine God thinks about when God thinks about you?

Does God keep your letters and correspondence in a treasured place?

Does God put your artwork up on the fridge?

When you make a mistake, how do you imagine God reacts?

And when you make a serious mistake with serious consequences—something either you did that you shouldn't have done, or some needed good that you didn't do when you could have—how do you suppose God regards you?

On July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Massachusetts (now Connecticut), one of the most well-known theologians of the time, Jonathan Edwards, preached a sermon called, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

It's really charming: "The wrath of God," he said, "is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose."

Furthermore, [ahem], "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God...that keeps the arrow one moment" from being released.

"It is true," he said, "that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath..."

This is from a sermon that took at least an hour to preach, and we're, like, halfway through.

Edwards says: “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire”—this is what he said—“*abhors* you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.”¹

Does that sound right to you? Because I'm not seeing it. I mean, sure, it's an innovative approach to evangelism—hey, it brought 'em in in 1741; it was like they couldn't get enough of it—but I can't square the God of the Bible with this vision at all.

What I just read in Genesis doesn't dissuade me from believing that God is the eternal and all-powerful judge, and will judge righteously;

and that bullies in particular had better be among the first to knock it off and beg forgiveness from God and their victims, whether on the playground or in the bedroom, or on the mean streets, or in white collars, or in clergy collars; or on social media, or in traditional media; military or paramilitary; whether at the household or neighborhood or societal or governmental or international levels.

That passage about the covenant, immediately following the flood, doesn't dissuade me from one iota of belief that God is our righteous, eternal and omni-powerful Judge.

And God knows, too, that decent and even generous people become bullies when they're afraid—often having been egged on by those who stand to profit from other people's fear.

Which has to do with what the passage from Genesis *does* tell me:

that far from utter disgust with each of us; far from a seething rage that can barely be contained an instant longer, God is always holding out hope for us—that it won't require another massive devastation in order to rid the world of our selfish errors and arrogant, apathetic crimes against each other and creation;

that we won't need to face the end of days just to learn to enact justice in our lives and in the world, and bask and revel in being kind to each other, and give up our arrogance and walk humbly with our ever-faithful God;

that we will summon, from deep inside, that feeling of absolute dependenceⁱⁱ implanted within each one of us, that opens our eyes and ears and minds and hearts to awe, wonder, joy and gratitude for who we are and how we came to be here.

The covenant tells us that the Almighty Creator of all that is—the universe that is known to us and the whole cosmos with dimensions and mysteries about which we have no clue, as well as the spiritual universe that can only be explored but never mapped or claimed as a territory—

the covenant tells us that that almighty, eternal Creator knows and cares about every single living thing. Including you.

What do you suppose is God's intention for you?

With his characteristic brevity and immediacy, Mark gives us three completely unadorned sentences about Jesus' baptism, and for what happens next, delivers only the bullet points, and leaves it to our imagination to fill in the details:

- “the Spirit immediately drove Jesus 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.”

And then the story moves on, as if Mark feels an urgent and immediate need to just get the facts out there and get Jesus moving toward the cross. Mark doesn't have time to ruminate or speculate about what happened in those forty days.

So every word is significant. And Mark takes the time to mention that in his time of trial and temptation in the wilderness—as private, unseen or heard, and unknowable to us as the moment of resurrection in the tomb will be—that Jesus was with the wild beasts: the ones that God loves enough to include in the covenantal promise.

To be with the wild beasts may mean that he lived like an animal, or lived in constant fear of them, or that he became part of a natural ecosystem, or that the wild beasts are metaphors for what lurks within each of us, and he successfully confronted his to encourage us to confront our own.

Or it may mean that during those initiating forty days, after baptism and just before he begins his ministry, that Jesus is getting used to being among the wild beasts, roaring their terrible roar, gnashing their terrible teeth, rolling their terrible eyes, showing their terrible claws.ⁱⁱⁱ Beasts like the hypocrites and the oppressor-occupiers and the soldiers and the tax collectors and the corrupt officials and the religious reactionaries and the Roman executioners and everybody else.

And for those people—every one of those wild beasts—he goes on his inexorable way to the cross, and offers them the hope of eternal life and almost inconceivable love.

This is already a time of tragedy and isolation; we are already coping with the challenges of emotional and physical and spiritual deprivation and the testing of literally everyone's resilience. Quite a context in which to be invited to walk that lonesome valley of Lent.

So it's good for us to remember that the road leads *toward* the consolations of God, not away from them.

When you go into the wilderness, and fast, and are tempted and you see more of who you really are than perhaps we have a chance to see in ordinary time, you're not going to find anything in there that isn't already known to God.

Nothing you are going to find is going to be more than you and God can deal with.

May these forty days bring you clarity and hope and strength. May they draw you closer to God.

May you come out of this wilderness more able and more inclined to love God and your neighbor and yourself.

May your wilderness experience bring you face to face with whatever wild beasts you need to encounter.

And when your resilience and maybe even your faith are tested, or just when you are at the start, middle and end of another day, graciously granted by your creator, may the angels come and wait on you, perhaps even encouragingly whispering in your ear from time to time: What do you suppose is God's intention for you?

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ⁱ Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God," July 8, 1741, Enfield, CT

ⁱⁱ Schleiermacher's classic term

ⁱⁱⁱ This language is from the classic children's book: Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (HarperCollins 1963), 17