

## COMPANIONS IN THE WILDERNESS

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

Sunday, March 1, 2009

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

One of the youth emailed this little story to me a few weeks ago, and it is an interesting place to begin our Lenten journey this morning:

A wealthy Gentleman decides to go on a hunting safari in Africa, taking his faithful, elderly German Shepherd along for the trip.

One day the old dog starts chasing rabbits and before long, discovers that he's lost. Wandering about, he notices a leopard heading rapidly in his direction with the intention of having lunch.

The old German Shepherd thinks, 'Oh, oh! I'm in a mess now!' Noticing some bones on the ground close by, he immediately settles down to chew on the bones with his back to the approaching cat.

Just as the leopard is about to leap, the old German Shepherd exclaims loudly, 'Boy, that was one delicious leopard! I wonder, if there are any more around here?'

Hearing this, the young leopard halts his attack in mid-strike, a look of terror comes over him and he slinks away into the trees. 'Whew!' says the leopard, 'That was close! That old German Shepherd nearly had me!'

Meanwhile, a monkey who had been watching the whole scene from a nearby tree, figures he can put this knowledge to good use and trade it for protection from the leopard. So, off he goes, but the old German Shepherd sees him heading after the leopard with great speed, and figures that something must be up.

The monkey soon catches up with the leopard, spills the beans and strikes a deal for himself with the leopard. The young leopard is furious at being made a fool of and says, 'Here, monkey, hop on my back and see what's going to happen to that conniving canine! Now, the old German Shepherd sees the leopard coming with the monkey on his back and thinks, 'What am I going to do now?', but instead of running, the dog sits down with his back to his attackers, pretending he hasn't seen them yet, and just when they get close enough to hear, the old German Shepherd says...

'Where's that monkey? I sent him off an hour ago to bring me another leopard!'

According the email, the moral of this story is don't mess with the old dogs... Brilliance only comes with age and experience. I'm still not one hundred percent sure why this particular youth thought to send me this story, but whether it was my age, experience, or a mere coincidence, something in the story stuck with me. As I mulled it over the past few weeks, I couldn't help but feel a connection between this story and the journey on which we embark this first Sunday in Lent.

We begin our Lenten journey each year with the story from the gospels about Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he encounters obstacles to his survival. The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the three gospel versions of this narrative and the Gospel of John does not include it at all. The most familiar parts of this story are told by the gospels of Matthew and Luke

who fill in the details of the temptations by including a dialogue between the “tempter” and Jesus. Matthew’s Gospel tells it this way:

*The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “God will command the angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’*

*Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’ - Matthew 4:3-10 (NRSV)*

Jesus handles these obstacles, in the detail of Matthew and Luke’s gospels and in the broad strokes of Mark’s gospel, with the agility of an old German Shepherd. Despite his youth, Jesus seems to have an acute awareness of his call, his surroundings, and which companions around him are trustworthy. All of the gospels, including John, show the people around Jesus at awe of his wisdom and ability to teach, preach and encounter potential conflict with a clever turn of phrase or reversal of the question onto those would hope to trap him.

He is consistently able to respond with brilliance in these moments. His cleverness is not mere self-preservation, in the gospels, his response to temptation and challenge alike is to use it as opportunity to teach. In this fashion, his ability to avert temptation in the wilderness is not just part of his own journey, but has become a standard bearer for spiritual discipline. Resistance of temptation despite physical needs has become a model for Lenten disciplines throughout the centuries and across denominational allegiances.

But this model of physical deprivation and consistent cleverness is a high bar for which to reach each Lenten season, especially if we feel less confident in our faith. I’ve known many of you for some years now, and I’d say you are German Shepherd-like Christians, you can handle the fears and doubts with agility and brilliance. I also know you hold the history of your faith dear, and can probably remember what it is like to be young in your faith, unsure and full of questions, and even doubts. There are some here today who are in that questioning stage of faith. Let me go far as to suggest that maybe even some of you who are among the brilliant models of faith have felt a twinge of uncertainty lately. The temptations have become more persistent, confidence has flagged. The worries of the world are mounting, leopards are poised on every rock and we know our physicality is no longer a strength, but a liability.

If you are exhausted and worried, if the prospect of even finding your way to the wilderness of Lent seems overwhelming, if you are unsure and seeking clarity about how you might experience Lent as a touchstone, the brevity of Mark’s gospel about Jesus’ time in the wilderness has much to offer. The passage that Edee read to us from Mark chapter 1 this morning

creates a very different impression of Jesus' wilderness time, and gives us a very different pattern for which to measure our Lenten experience.

Mark's Gospel recounts Jesus baptism, time in the wilderness, and the beginning of his preaching in Galilee in seven verses. The gospel counterparts, Matthew and Luke, take twenty-two and seventeen verses to convey the same information. Biblical scholars believe now that the gospel writers of Matthew, Luke and Mark had a common written source of Jesus' life and sayings around which they structured their gospel accounts. Mark's gospel is believed to have been written as the earliest of the gospels, and the community from which it emerged clearly had a desire to show Jesus' life happening in rapid, concise movements. Matthew and Luke's gospels linger more over details and expand ideas around certain issues that pertain to their individual communities.

The simplicity of Mark's gospel captures Jesus time in the wilderness this way: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." You hear the framework of the familiar details in this account: the Spirit's involvement in sending him to the wilderness, forty days spent there, and the temptations from Satan. You don't hear many of the details we have come to associate with this narrative: no fasting, no account of how Jesus reacted to the temptations by Satan, no articulation of Satan's questions to Jesus.

Yet despite its brevity, Mark's gospel does several interesting things in describing this scene. First, the Spirit seems to have a less nurturing role than what we have come to expect, and indeed than what the other Gospels expect. In Mark's gospel, the Spirit "drives" Jesus into the wilderness, whereas in Matthew and Luke, the Spirit "leads" Jesus into the wilderness.

Second, the temptations by Satan seem almost a side note. There is no intentionality, as there is in Matthew's gospel, that these "temptations" are why Jesus is sent to the wilderness. Neither is there any concern given to how Jesus responds to these temptations – a concern that clearly interested other Gospel communities in their accounting of this interaction – as the dialogue between Jesus and Satan is the focus of both Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel wilderness narratives. Mark's gospel merely reports the temptations as something that happened, no report is given as to what the temptations involved or how Jesus responded to them.

Lastly, Mark's Gospel adds a tiny clause that none of the other Gospel writers retain, "and he was with the wild beasts." The verse finishes with "and the angels waited on him." These seemingly miniscule details actually convey a powerful message about Jesus' time in the wilderness: he was not alone.

The wilderness in the Gospel of Mark is not the wilderness of testing and tempering, it is not a wilderness passed through eagerly and alone, a last right of passage marking preparedness for a life of ministry. The wilderness of the Gospel of Mark is a wilderness of uncertainty, a place entered with reluctance, a place Jesus is chased to, the Spirit on his heels. The wilderness of the Gospel of Mark is not a place where cleverness overcomes the greatest fatigue. The wilderness of the Gospel of Mark is not a place of solitude. The wilderness of the Gospel of Mark is a place of companionship, from the beasts that call it home to the angels that visit it. The wilderness of the Gospel of Mark is a lot like where we are right now: filled with uncertainty, tempted consistently by things that don't bring life, but accompanied by all creation.

If you find yourself at the beginning of this Lenten season exhausted and worried, if the prospect of even finding your way to the wilderness of Lent seems overwhelming, if you are unsure and seeking clarity about how you might experience Lent as a touchstone, the brevity of Jesus' time in the wilderness in Mark's gospel has much to offer. For this wilderness is not a spiritual plateau that you must seek out in order to draw strength, this wilderness is wherever you find yourself right now. Whatever has brought you here, whatever worries are on your heart, whomever you seek, whatever your passions are, your wilderness is right here. The wilderness and the world are one. Our Lenten journey is not made apart and separate, our Lenten journey is made with companionship. Look around. This congregation may not look like – or be -- a gathering of angels, but we do accompany each other on this journey. The wilderness is uncertain, but it need not be lonely.

Mary Oliver, in her poem, *Wild Geese*, reminds us that “Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, call to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things.” Our wilderness is right here, right now. God calls on our imaginations to journey through this wilderness. We need not know the answer to every riddle or turn of phrase to counteract every temptation. We need merely remember that one of our companions on this journey is God. God, whose covenant with us promises not to separate us. God, whose call to us is harsh and exciting, is easily heard above the gusts of uncertainty in the wilderness. Our Lenten journey begins with confidence. Our Lenten journey begins with imagination. Our Lenten journey begins here, in the wilderness together.

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