

Wrestling with Wild Beasts

Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday in Lent, (Feb. 18) 2024

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The late theologian and friend to this church, James McClendon begins his three-volume systematic theology with these words, “Theology means struggle. It may begin as Bonhoeffer said in silence, but when the silence is broken, a battle begins... we must be reconciled to the fact that here as elsewhere hard truth is not available without hard struggles” (James William McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, first edition, p. 17).

In 1961 Flannery O’Connor had just given a lecture at Emory University and was approached by a shy freshman who was struggling with his faith in the middle of questions raised by his classes. The young student, Alfred Corn, who later became a distinguished poet, said he was afraid of losing his faith. The conversation continued between Flannery O’Connor and Corn by letter. O’Connor told Corn that the Christian faith was never a thing to be taken for granted, never a set of confident assumptions that one relies on without challenge. Rather it is a matter of contention, struggle. She says because faith is God’s supreme gift, it requires our constant wrestling and striving to gain greater clarity and conviction, our persistent probing of its mysterious depths, even our Jacob-like grappling with God amidst doubts (see Ralph Wood, *Contending for the Faith*, p. 3-4; and Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, p. 1163).

To be a person of faith means being willing to struggle. To follow Jesus as a disciple means a willingness to strive and contend and wrestle. Sometimes it’s a slight question in the back of your mind about something the Bible says or something you heard in church. Other times, it is full-blown lying awake at night

contending in your heart and mind, worrying, fretting, praying, going walking alone and arguing with God out loud. What do I believe and not believe? What do I do? What's God's will?

We ask, "What would Jesus do?" And sometimes the answer is that I know what Jesus would do and I'm not Jesus – I don't know if I can do that. If I go against that evil, or that wrong, I might lose my job. Or my family members might lose their jobs or they'll be audited by the IRS or they'll be harassed, or I'll have a cross burned in my yard, or I'll have a Maga giant pickup truck roaring up and down the street in front of my house night after night, or friends will no longer speak to me, or ... you get the idea. Struggle. Wrestling. It's hard. Jesus did not end up on a cross because it was easy.

The Gospel lesson today is about wrestling and struggle. It's the first Sunday of Lent and, as always on this day, we hear of the temptation of Jesus. His temptation is part of the drama of his opening days of ministry. He is baptized, which inaugurates his ministry.

And immediately (Mark's favorite word) after his baptism he is thrown, according to Mark's Gospel, into the wilderness. And there he is confronted by "wild beasts." You may recall that in Matthew and Luke Jesus is met by "the tempter" or "Satan." But Mark tells us that "wild beasts" were there, too.

For people who lived in that day, in that part of the world, huddled behind walls in their cities, you can imagine what "wilderness" signified for them, what these "wild beasts" meant - those forces arrayed against civilization, against goodness and peace, against the humane. The "wild beasts" are the shadow side of reality, that deep, dark world of chaotic evil that bubble up from time to time and challenge us.

But not before they challenged Jesus.

Martin Luther said that when the word is rightly preached, demons are loosed. That is, when the rightly preached Word of God is made flesh and stands before us, the forces of evil move into action. Later in Mark's Gospel, there will be times when no one recognizes who Jesus is, except for the demons.

“Get out of here, Jesus of Nazareth, we know who you are!” they scream at Jesus. Mark means to say, I think, that the forces of evil know their enemy when they see him.

So today's Gospel reminds us that Jesus has come, not only to be our friend, our comforter, and our guide but also he is with us in those situations when we stand face-to-face and must go toe-to-toe with evil. When we struggle, Christ is with us.

A few years ago, when the SFA Office of Multicultural Affairs still existed, they sponsored a banquet in which the featured speaker was Bernard LaFayette, who as a young man was part of the inner circle with Martin Luther King and John Lewis. Dr. LaFayette marched at Selma and the other places we read about. In his book *In Peace and Freedom: My Journey in Selma*, Dr. LaFayette says he was in Chicago fundraising when word came that Rev. James Reeb, a white minister from Boston, had been killed in Selma one night after a march. LaFayette writes, “My immediate horrified thought was that they were killing clergymen, men of God. If they had no respect for the cloth, I was certain they would place absolutely no value on the lives of ordinary people, especially blacks... It seemed that going down to Selma was like going to the cross, [we needed to be] prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice” (p. 130).

There are times when we must walk into enemy territory, the place of the cross, the place of the wild beasts – Selma, the cancer ward, the jail cell, the place of injustice, the valley of the shadow of death, the places of hate and bigotry, the places of fear – so know this, Jesus has invaded it before us. We walk not alone. If the church only has a word that is sunny, upbeat, bright, and cheerful, then we haven't told the whole story of who Jesus is.

The Catholic theologian, Monika Helwig, said some years ago, "If it won't play in a cancer ward, or a shoddy nursing home for the elderly, whatever it is, it's not the gospel."

Part of the good news is that Jesus walked into the wilderness, the place of struggle and temptation, the hard place, and he faced evil and the wild beasts. He goes ahead of us and he goes with us. And I don't know about you but I take comfort in that.

But wilderness is more than that's what out there. It's also what's inside us. Sometimes temptation is like this - some wild thing waiting to jump us. Remember back in Genesis 4 and the story of Cain and Abel, and Cain is angry. God warns him, "Take care, sin is crouching at the door." Sin is the wild beast crouching outside the door.

The psychiatrist and writer Robert Coles spent the summer of 1960 in Mississippi interviewing folk, black and white, caught up in the troubles there. He interviewed a white supremacist named John, spending hours listening to this man who had planned crimes of hate. What made him do it? What made him brag about horrible deeds? What made this apparently rather decent man stoop to such evil?

Coles later wrote in *Children of Crisis*, "We must all know the animal in us can be elaborately rationalized in a society until an act of murder is called self-

defense, and dynamited houses become evidence of moral courage.” – the animal in us, the wild beast in the wilderness.

Some of you will remember the name of Chris Kyle, a Navy Seal sniper in Iraq several years ago, and made famous in a 2014 movie called *American Sniper* in which Bradley Cooper played Kyle. In his autobiography Chris Kyle says that he got a tattoo of a Crusader cross on his arm. “*I wanted everyone to know I was a Christian. I had it put in red, for blood. I hated the damn savages I’d been fighting ... I always will.*” Following a day of sniping, after killing perhaps as many as six people, he would go back to his barracks to spend his time smoking Cuban cigars and “playing video games, watching porn and working out.” On leave, something omitted in the movie, he was frequently arrested for drunken bar fights. His memoir glorifies white, “Christian” supremacy and war (based upon Chris Hedges’ review of the book).

Part of danger is not simply the wilderness and the wild beasts out there. It’s that the wilderness and wild beasts get in us. We send young people to war and expect them to have no trauma. We think that the ends justify any means we deem necessary. And we think that young people immersing themselves in violent games and movies, and living amid a violent culture, does not affect them. And furthermore, we think all of this does not affect who we are and who we become as a society as well as individual persons.

One of the great insights of the great spiritual masters across the centuries is that if we’re not very careful, we become the very enemy we oppose. And when we think that the ends justify any means necessary, what happens is that the means change the ends. In other words, we think we can have peace by being killers and what happens is that killing is who we become.

Be careful, sin is crouching outside the door.

The Apostle Paul said, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against principalities and powers, against the cosmic rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). We’re in a struggle but there is a Way in the struggle. Indeed, there is *the* Way of Jesus in the struggle.

Congressman John Lewis was a nineteen-year-old student in Nashville, when he was first trained by Rev. James Lawson in the teachings and practices of nonviolence, along with others like his best friend Bernard LaFayette. He writes in his memoir *Walking with the Wind* of being trained in “soul force.” Soul force is the practice, practice, practice of learning to “love the hell out of people.” Literally. “If there is hell in someone, if there is meanness and anger and hatred in him [or her], we’ve got to *love* it out.”

Soul force is learning that we are called to suffer alongside others and in that suffering God brings about healing and wholeness and change. Of practicing having a graceful heart and practicing love that recognizes each person, no matter what they’re doing to us, as a child of God. Of practicing forgiveness and “knowing that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he [or she] is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his [or her] anger and fury.”

John Lewis said that soul force is a way of life. “It is not something that we turn off and on like a faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion, is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day.”

Lewis said, “Jim Lawson knew – though we had no idea when we began – that we were being trained for a war unlike any this nation had seen up to that time, a nonviolent struggle...” (John Lewis references are from pp. 76-78).

Let me be honest with you. What Lewis writes about is what we call Christian discipleship. This is what we do. We are here to worship God and become followers of this God we know in Jesus. We are training to be like him. So we practice, practice, practice for the struggle. It is struggle inside of us – of God loving the hell out of us and of us loving the hell out of each other and others. We struggle against fear and anxiety, against depression and despair, against anger and rage. And it is a struggle outside of us. It is a struggle with wild beasts and Lent is forty days of intensive training. Lent is each of us staring the beasts in the eyes.

Kayla Mueller was killed a few years ago while a captive held by ISIS militants. They had taken her captive when she had been working with Doctors Without Borders in a hospital dedicated to treating refugees from Syria’s civil war. And though she does not use the term, she knew about soul force. In a letter written to her parents that they received after her death, she said:

“I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our Creator because literally there was no one else.” She adds: “I have been shown in darkness, light and have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it.”

The product of this prayer, she says, is personal strength: “None of us could have known it would be this long but know I am also fighting from my side in the

ways I am able and I have a lot of fight left inside of me. I am not breaking down and I will not give in no matter how long it takes.”

What Kayla Mueller knew is what John Lewis knew: we’re in a fight. We’re wrestling with wild beasts. But we are not alone. Jesus Christ is with us. Jesus wrestled with the wild beasts and was victorious by way of the cross – soul force. And someday, the promise is that in Christ, the wild beasts will become our friends and the lions and lambs will lie down together and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Nancy Sehested is one of the greatest preachers I’ve ever heard and a truly remarkable Christian of incredible courage. She’s been here several times over the years and some of you will remember that she’s only about 5 feet 2 and petite. A few years ago she told us when she was a chaplain of a maximum-security men’s prison and the conflict she had with the lieutenant of the prison guards. He didn’t like having a woman chaplain around. But about a year or so after she was there and after she helped break up a fight that threatened to spread into a riot, he stood in her office door and said, “You don’t like it but you need me and I don’t like it but I need you.”

Nancy said, “Yes, Lieutenant I know I need you and your officers to keep security on the floor. But why do you need me?”

He said, “I need you to teach me another kind of force.”

That’s why we’re here – to learn another kind of force and to teach it to others. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.