

With the Wild Beasts

Isaiah 11:6-9; Mark 1:9-15

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*I have found, in short, from the reading of my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.*

- Flannery O'Connor ("On Her Own Work")

*The poet (Isaiah) imagines a coming time ... when all relationships of hostility and threat, in the animal world as in the human environment, shall be overcome. There will be conciliation and peaceableness among these species that have been at war with each other since the beginning of time.*

- Walter Brueggemann

What a week! What a way to begin Lent! In my Ash Wednesday sermon (which you can view online on this same site you're viewing now), I talked about living in liminal, in-between times, where things are not normal, not like they used to be, where everything is stripped away, and we have to rely only on God. When there is no electricity, no heat, no water, everything is covered in ice and we can't get out and no one can get in, who are we? What might God teach us in all this? What can we learn about ourselves and our society during all this? What do we really need and what do we not? How can we better care for each other and care for our neighbors? And how might we draw closer to God? These are Lenten questions, and these are questions we are asking this week.

Lent is what the Bible calls “wilderness,” which is where Mark tells us today that after his baptism, the Spirit immediately drove Jesus. Out into the threatening, hostile, unknown. The Spirit drove Jesus. Jesus didn’t go because he wanted to but because he was called. And going into the wilderness, Jesus answered the call.

I remember from my childhood, as well as the childhood of our girls, that in the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow reach the edge of what is usually called the “haunted forest.” Dorothy says, “I don’t like this forest. It’s dark and creepy.” She goes on, “Do you think we’ll meet any wild animals?”

“We might,” responds the Tin Man.... “But mostly lions, and Tigers, and Bears.”

Dorothy says, “Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my.” And soon all three of them join together, “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my.”

Well, Mark says the Spirit drives Jesus into just such a place. Dark and creepy, full of lions and tigers, and bears, oh my!”

The wilderness, the unknown, is threatening exactly because it is where we struggle – struggle to stay warm, struggle to have enough to eat, struggle to have enough water, struggle for health care, struggle for justice, struggle against hate, struggle against racism, struggle to survive, and struggle to love God. It is not neat and tidy, and usually there are no simple solutions if there are any solutions at all. It is messy and agonizing. It’s hard.

And the Spirit drove Jesus immediately into such a place. Immediately Jesus enters the struggle. After his baptism, Jesus did NOT catch a plane to Cancun! He went into the place of struggle with lions and tigers and bears, oh my.

Mark says he was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit and was tempted by Satan, and then Mark adds that Jesus “was with the wild beasts” (1:13).

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, and what these “wild beasts” meant. Certainly, it was lions and tigers and bears, oh my, but it was also more than that. It was what wild beasts represented: all 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, sin, and death that challenges us, seeking to wear us down and crush us.

Life with Jesus is full of struggle because Jesus enters into the wilderness of this world and the wilderness of our lives and contends with the wild beasts.

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 was 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 said 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. 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 on long walks, and arguing with God out loud. What do I believe and not believe? What do I do? What's God's will? Why would God allow such evil? Why doesn't God do something? Does God even listen? Does God care? Does God exist?

Struggle. Wrestling. It's hard. Jesus did not end up on a cross because his Way is easy.

A few years ago, the SFA Office of Multicultural Affairs sponsored a banquet in which the featured speaker was Bernard LaFayette, who as a young man was part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee with 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 in 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 – but 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 Jesus.

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 racial justice struggles. 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.

Part of danger is that the wilderness and wild beasts get in us. We oppose darkness and never notice when the darkness gets inside of us. We train and train young people to become warriors and to use violence. We send them into war after war and then we are shocked when they come home and stockpile guns and look at our own society as a combat zone. We think that the ends justify any means we deem necessary. 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. We think we can hate and get our guns ready all in the name of God, and we think it is all righteous because we're ready to kill in God's name. But when we give into such thinking, we no longer worship the God known in Jesus Christ. The means has changed the ends. Beware! Be careful! Sin, the beast, is crouching outside the door.

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. Soul force is 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."

John Lewis wrote, "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).

What Lewis writes about is what we call Christian discipleship. This is what we do. We are called 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. And it is a struggle outside of us. It is a struggle with wild beasts and Lent is forty days of intensive training.

We are not training for walks in the park. We have to learn to struggle hard. We have to fight and cry and pray and cry and fight some more. Sometimes we need to go back to the basics: sing the old hymns, read the old Bible, practice the old rituals, and pray the old prayers – over and over, by ourselves and most certainly when possible, with each other. Sometimes we are unable to do any of the old things but sit and wait in God and that might take a long time. The temptation is to throw in the towel too soon. Instead of digging down to the solid rock of Christ and finding a new place to stand, we give up. It's hard and it takes time, and

it takes a faith that reaches down deep. This is why we pray for one another and call one another.

Last week I introduced us to Maggy Barankitse, the Burundian Tutsi, devoted to the Way of Jesus Christ in the midst of incredible violence, hatred, and brutality, creating Maison Shalom (“House of Peace”). Maggy is devoted to caring for the children who have experienced such overwhelming traumatic brutality. She said she knew early on it was going to be hard.

Nine-year-old Justine came to Maggy soon after Justine’s village was destroyed and burned, and a neighbor she grew up knowing, killed her parents and her sister and burned their home to the ground. What was incredible is that Justine wanted Maggy to go with her back to her village and to the neighbor to confront him with the radical love of Jesus. Justine – a nine-year-old – said that her house could not be rebuilt without first rebuilding the heart that had been destroyed in the violence. She said, “I want to *live* ... If I hate him, I can’t live ... The hatred stops me from continuing to live.”

So Maggy went with Justine to see her family’s killer. Justine went up to the man, “I want to ask you to ask me for forgiveness. I am able to forgive you.” The man was shocked by the child’s request. But then he was even more shocked when Justine said, “Because you can’t give me back my father, my mom, my sister, I ask you to become my father.” The man accepted and they rebuilt the house together, along with Maggy. Several years later, when the man became ill, Justine took care of him. At his funeral she cried and brought flowers. Not long before his death, the man testified to Maggy, “Thank you, Maggy. Because now I am dying like a human person, not like a killer. Your forgiveness gave me back hope, love, life” (in Norman Wirzba, *Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity*, p. 189).

What Maggy and Justine knew is what John Lewis and Bernard LaFayette 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).

Hear me! That's the gospel!

A few years ago, Nancy Sehested stood in this pulpit and 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."

Austin Heights Baptist Church, that's why we're here – to learn another kind of force.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.