

“Wild Beasts and Angels of Mercy”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Lent, Sunday, February 18, 2018

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Holy Scriptures: Genesis 9: 8-17 Mark 1: 9-15

Genesis 9:8-17 (NRSV)

⁸ Then 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, ¹⁰ and 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. ¹¹ I 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.” ¹² God 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I 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. ¹⁶ When 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.” ¹⁷ God 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 (NRSV)

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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

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

Today's message is inspired by the teaching and storytelling of Henri Nouwen,
to whom I am exceedingly grateful.

¹² God 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I 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. –Genesis 9: 12-15

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. –Mark 1: 12-13

Overhear a story about a little river.
The little river said, "I can become a big river."

The little river worked hard, but there was a great rock.
The river said, "I'm going to get around this rock."
The little river pushed and pushed,
and since it had a lot of strength, it got itself around the rock.

Soon the river faced a big wall; the river kept pushing against the wall.
The river's efforts carved a way through the terrain and made a canyon.
The growing river said, "I can do it. I can push and carve, control and dominate.
I am not going to let down for anything."

Then there was an enormous forest.
The river said, "I'll go through anyway, and force these trees down."
And the river did.

The river, now powerful, rolling along, mighty and deep and proud,
found itself on the edge of an enormous desert,
a desert as wide as the horizon, baking, with the sun beating down.
The river said, "I bested a rock; I carved through a wall; I overwhelmed a forest.
I'm going to go over and across this desert."

As soon as its waters rolled and waded into the desert,
the hot sand soon began to soak up the mighty river.
The river said, "Oh, no. I'm going to get myself through this desert.
I can reach the other side. I can do this myself."

Before it knew what was happening,
the river drained into the sand,
absorbed by the dunes and merciless heat,
until all that remained was a small, muddy pool.

The river, now a tiny oasis, cried out for mercy, for help, for succor.

Then the river heard a Voice from above:

“Surrender. Let me lift you up. Let me take over.”

The river said, “Here I am.”

The sun shone its rays upon the muddy pool, caressing what was left,
which then evaporated into mist, into moisture;
and so, the sun lifted the river,
transforming the once mighty river into a glorious cloud,
the sky now tinged with the colors of the rainbow.

The sun carried the river in its arms over the desert,
and let the cloud rain down upon the rich fields and farmlands on the other side,
and thus, the fields far away became fruitful,
and the river lived in the juicy flesh of the fruits of the land.

For each of us there is a moment—or moments—in our life
when we stand before the desert and want to do it ourselves.
Hey, it worked back there with the rock, and the wall, and the forest.
For each of us there is the Voice that comes, that speaks to us, that communes with us:
“Let go. Surrender. I will make you fruitful. Yes, trust me. Give yourself to me.”
Hey, maybe I should try this, for once, and live my life God’s way.

What counts in your life and mine is not successes but fruits.
Let me say that again.
What counts in your life is not successes but fruits.

The fruits of your life you might not see yourself.
The fruits of your life might be very different to God
than the expectations of our cultural context.
We like to think or feel, boast or persuade ourselves
that the fruits of our lives
are the rocks we rolled over, walls we overcame, forests we conquered.

And they very well may be.

No judgment here.

However, as we ponder Jesus’ experience in the desert,
replete with wild beasts and angels of mercy,
and Noah’s in the flood,
complete with beasts in the hold and a rainbow of promise,
both stories are about surrendering,
giving in, letting go, letting God take the point.

After Jesus was baptized, the power of the Holy Spirit led him into the desert.
There he prayed and fasted and pondered God's call upon his life;
There he was surrounded by wild beasts and angels of mercy.
We know what that is like.

How many of us have been tended to by angels of mercy?

Memorable? Oh, yeah.

We easily recall such moments, faces, voices, smells, scenery, touch.

How has God directed you in your faith journey

to be, to become, to serve Christ as an angel of mercy for someone else?

Memorable? Oh, yeah.

We easily recall such moments, faces, voices, smells, scenery, touch.

On the flip side, we have at times found ourselves behaving as beasts,
beasts to one another, or even to ourselves.

Sometimes we are so hard on ourselves;

we can be our toughest critics.

Memories like these we would rather suppress, deny, forget, ignore.

Yet it is far better to claim it, name it, own up to it,

and seek forgiveness and restoration.

We call such an experience reconciliation.

The grace we experience which enables us to get to the other side of the desert
is so amazing, such a blessing, as to be life-altering.

Yesterday, after Jay Norton's lovely memorial service,

Johnny and Emmie Lee reminded me of one of Jay's favorite stories.

On one of our mission trips after Hurricane Katrina,

Jay Norton was set up in the yard of the home torn asunder by the storm,
working his power saw, cutting 2x4s and sheets of plywood.

The homeowner watched as church members returned again and again to Jay,
asking for advice or getting perfectly cut boards.

Finally, she approached him and asked, "Sir, are you the church pastor?"

Jay took off his hat, wiped his brow, looked her in the eye,

and said, "Ma'am, I'm the reason our church has a pastor."

Every now and then, our beloved Jay took risks to connect with God and God's people,
even if it required him to step out of his comfort zone.

Jesus took a risk; He stepped out of his comfort zone.

While in the desert, He welcomed angels of mercy, who ministered to Him.

This gave Him the inner strength to relinquish His temptation to be in control,
to let go and do God's will.

This is about letting God carry you out of your comfort zone and into the unknown,
trusting that the Holy Spirit, the Voice,

who asks only for your trust and availability,
will guide you and sustain you and plant you
where your faithfulness becomes fruitful,
a blessing, an agency for grace,
and multiplies.

The fruits of your life are often born in your pain
and in your vulnerability and in your losses.
The fruits of your life come only after the plow has carved through your land.
God wants you to be fruitful.

The question is not,
“How much can I still do in the years that are left to me?”
The question is,
“How can I prepare myself for total surrender, so my life can be fruitful?”

In the eyes of the One who calls us the beloved,
we are great--greater than the years we have.
The Voice of the Son of God, who sees you and loves you and claims you,
speaks of you, so proudly, saying,
“This is my beloved! With you I am well pleased.”

With divine greatness comes great responsibility.
We are the ones God calls and guides and plants to be and bear good fruit.
We have responsibilities in our context, and we shall not shrink from them.
This is not an egotistic statement by a high and mighty Christian.
This comes from a humbled, empowered, awed follower of Jesus the Christ
who seeks to be a channel for the Holy Spirit.
Again, we have responsibilities to hold up in our community,
and we shall not shrink from them.

One arena we must address today
is that adults have abdicated our responsibility to be present.
“I must defend my home!” said Macaulay Culkin.
The film “Home Alone” was a microcosm of the truth
that young people are now expected to figure life out on their own,
that if there is anything they need to learn
they can—and must—discern it by their lonesome.

As we prepared for Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent,
we learned of the tragic school shooting in Florida
that left 17 dead and more injured.
Since the beginning of 2018,
18 shootings have taken place on school property across the country.

18 shootings on school property so far this year, and today is February 18.

After each one, our children and teenagers have looked to adults and said,
“Do something, please. Lord, have mercy.
Or, must I defend my home, my school, my own life?”

Two days ago, a father in Iowa dropped his child off at his elementary school.
The boy looked back at his dad and said, “I hope I don’t get shot today.”

Our little rivers and streams and brooks in our midst
look for someone, anyone, please, to take responsibility,
to hear the cries for mercy, for help, for succor.
Let the Church take a stand, to serve God as responsible adults.
Let’s become angels of mercy.
Let’s be present, visible, engaged, willing to take a risk in order to save a life.
Let’s be a part of the dialogue that needs to happen about violence and weaponry,
a dialogue which is NOT happening.
Let’s only vote for candidates who vow to be proactive and not foils for lobbyists.
Let’s teach peace,
present alternatives to violence, and
practice communicating across the great divide.
If ever we must be beastly,
let’s be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Let’s ask God and one another,
“How shall I prepare myself for total surrender, so my life can be fruitful?”

Remember our friend the river?

The once mighty river, it’s origin and orientation a wonderful creation of God,
found itself disoriented, a fragment of what it once was, afraid,
seemingly nothing left but a muddy pool in a vast desert,
only to let go and allow God
to evaporate it, transform it, reorient it into a cloud.

The once mighty river became a cloud,
a cloud carried in the arms of the Sun,
trail blazoned with rainbows,
delighted to be remade as rain and dew,
fresh water that rained on the fields of the Lord,
reborn again and again, fruitful.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!