

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am in awe of Mark the Evangelist. This guy didn't waste any words. He just got down to the business of relating the good news, and he did it economically and beautifully. We're given 7 verses from Mark's first chapter today –and within them there are no less than 3 *major* episodes in Jesus' public life.

First, Jesus' public ministry begins at his baptism. When he came up out of the river, he saw the heavens torn apart—I imagine that the bright sky zipped open and Jesus looked deep into and beyond the dark, sparkling cosmos, and heard the voice of God speaking to him: “you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Holy Spirit fluttered down upon him like a dove might flutter down from the sky. It's quite a beautiful picture, isn't it?

But then the very next sentence brings some startling drama. That selfsame Spirit, so dove-like, so beautiful, now turns pushy and insistent, and *drives* Jesus out into the wilderness. Why would the Spirit, the loving, lovely Spirit, do such a thing? We can only speculate: perhaps it was God's will that Jesus be out there in the middle of nowhere, doing the hard inner work it took to understand fully what God wanted of him. Perhaps. We really don't know, do we?

The wilderness was that area on either side of the Jordan River. It's very dry, with only some small scrubby plants here and there. In Jesus' time there were some animals like little hyraxes (they look a little like groundhogs) and scorpions and foxes and deer and cheetahs and maybe even some lions. Today the most interesting animals are the small groups of semi-tame camels that wander through that vast area together. But back then there was nothing that was semi-

tame. They were all wild, and some, like the big cats, were very threatening.

Our text tells us that Jesus was in that dry, scrubby wilderness for 40 days—and we can't help but think of how he was reliving a part of the experience of the Israelites under Moses who wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years.

And what did Jesus do there? How would you spend 40 days in the middle of nowhere, without even a cell phone to help pass the time?

Again, our text gives us a few clues: he was tempted by Satan; he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Let's look at these things: tempted by Satan—what were the temptations? Mark doesn't tell us a thing about what they were. Matthew and Luke talk about 3 temptations to power, privilege, and prestige. But Mark doesn't. We might speculate on all kinds of temptations Jesus faced out there, and we'd probably be right. I'd imagine that as the Savior of humankind, he knew and experienced every temptation that humans face over their lifetimes. So, you name it, he almost certainly felt the allure of everything that is unholy and unhealthy. Of course he did.

And then we have a very interesting detail, only in Mark: he was with the wild beasts. Now, people throughout the ages have had lots of fun with this one. I mentioned earlier about the literal wild beasts that might be out there with Jesus. But how about the metaphorical wild beasts? How about things like a tendency to pride that might have been born from knowledge of his own gifts? How about a deep fear of the unknown—especially a fear of his upcoming suffering and torture and death? How about the anxiety he may naturally have carried / over leaving his livelihood in Nazareth and going forth into an unknown future, with uncertain support? We can go on and on...and we can be sure that Jesus certainly did have his own wild beasts with him.

And now the last clause: and the angels waited on him. This completes the wilderness suite so beautifully, and it is a reminder that even in times of stripping and testing, Jesus was consoled by messengers from God. I wonder, too, if like Elijah in the wilderness, perhaps Jesus was brought food and drink by angels ... It's not at all clear, but I wouldn't doubt / that could have been the case. Mark doesn't say that Jesus was fasting. That's in Matthew and Luke—not in this gospel.

And then we move on to the third little story in these 7 verses. After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, that region in the northern part of Palestine, and he began his ministry to the people. He told them, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Now, I think this time in the desert was absolutely crucial for Jesus. It was a time when his old identity was dissolved and a new one was forged. [paraphrase of Marilyn McCord Adams, p. 44] It was a time of struggle and testing – a time when a new self was being formed, not unlike the reorganization of a pupa within a cocoon / so that a fully formed butterfly might emerge when the time is right.

And note that the gospel makes it clear: "the time was fulfilled" only after he had this prolonged period of quiet and testing and reorganization.

Now, it's not just Jesus who had to pass through this kind of process, is it? All humans do it. As we move from one identity or station to another, we must go through this kind of testing and disorganization, of meeting our own wild beasts and of accepting the comfort that comes through angels.

Lent is our annual plunge into six weeks of penitence—of repenting—when we harness whatever courage God gives us to

take a look at how we're called to be changed—to be reorganized. Each Lent we look at how we're called to accept the grace that comes from God's angels that allows our lives to be turned around, past the temptations, past the wild beasts that assail us.

Ideally during this time, we deepen our knowledge of our faults and challenges by asking Jesus to help us go deeper inside ourselves and face the truth. Ideally, we seek forgiveness from people we've hurt and from our God. Ideally, we learn a little more about what God really wants of us in this life—which is to flourish, to learn, to strengthen our bonds with each other and with God.

Because the month of February reminds us to look outside ourselves and consider the affliction of racism, one of the attitudes of the heart we might adopt this Lent is an attitude of being teachable. It's true that many of us have lived a life of privilege in a stratified society. It's a fruitful exercise to reflect on how our lives are so privileged, and why. And to think about what the cost has been to so many more people who don't enjoy much privilege.

Now, if you're like me you may struggle with being told that we live in a racist society—or indeed that we ourselves still carry traces of this sin within our hearts and souls. For several years I was pretty resistant to going deeper within myself to seek it out / and to ask God to purge what was there. It's been quite the process. But God is faithful and will accomplish it. Perhaps some of us could choose to read a book like Waking Up White or the one called White Fragility, or even the one entitled How the South Won the Civil War. They are wake-up calls, quite literally, and they are ministrations from the angels.

Last week in her sermon about the life and work of Absalom Jones, the first African-American priest ordained in the Episcopal Church, Pastor Heidi told us that “racism still lurks in our churches and our communities.” This week I want to

take that truth another step and assert that / our churches and communities still subtly discriminate on the basis of race—because we ourselves still do it, too, usually quite unconsciously. This is something we can begin to work on this Lent, if we haven't already, and continue for as long as we live.

In the next weeks we'll walk with Jesus into chaos and not-knowing, and then past it / to resurrection life. May God give us strength and grace to go into the chaos and darkness of this holy time and to attend to the inner work that's put before us.

And like the Spirit tended to Jesus, may God give us the grace we need to remember that we're never totally alone in our times of testing, either. Yes, there are the wild beasts. But there are also angels out there who work to help us grow. Listen to them.

A happy Lent to you all.

Amen.