Lent 1—Year B
Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

Can you tell it's **Lent**? If we didn't know it on **Ash Wednesday**, we sure do after we've sung **The Great Litany**. It's a lot of ground to cover, and it's a lot to take in. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and to feel pretty small amidst all the forces at play.

And that is true of our lessons today, as well.

In **Genesis**, we get a **promise**, a **promise from God** no less, a **promise of relationship**, the **establishment of a covenant between God and all of Noah's descendants and with every living creature, 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.**

And, **God** goes one step more with **an outward and visible sign**—**God** says: **"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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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. 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."**

Several things to note here.

God, ***God*** **needs a reminder not to give in to anger**. **Even God loses it**. Within the narrative universe of this story, **God was completely fed up with what God's creatures had done with the freedom given them**. Pretty quickly, the **garden was a distant dream**, they were **killing each other**, and by the **6th chapter of Genesis**, **God** had determined that **the wickedness of humankind was great and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually; God was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth.** [Genesis 6:5-6]. That's quite an indictment.

So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" [Genesis 6:7]. And **the flood destroys everything, except Noah and his family, and pairs of animals**

Long ago, I remember hearing an **artist** comment on this passage—they said, **"It's like God is creating a piece of art, and it doesn't turn out like they wanted, and they rip it up, and throw it away."** It's quite a **temper tantrum God throws** with **catastrophic consequences** for all the **people and animals who *weren't* on the ark**, and *what did the poor animals do to deserve this anyway*? It's **humankind who God is really mad it**. But it just goes to show, **humankind's**

actions have an outsized impact on all the creatures of the earth, and on the earth itself. For better or worse, *our fate is all tied up together*.

But the larger point here is that ***God* is also growing up and evolving**. ***God*** has to **make peace with the fact that when you give creatures freedom**, they **aren't always going to do what you hope they will do**, and **your choice is either to toss that creation that bears your own image and likeness aside** OR **work with them**, and **grow and evolve with them**.

God lays down that urge to burn it all down when **God sets the bow in the clouds**, and the **weapon of destruction *becomes*** that which **holds the waters above at bay**. The **bow reminds God of God's own divine promise** and the **necessity of exercising restraint**, *even* when you are **frustrated and mad**. Anna gave me the word yesterday, this is a story about **disarmament**; this is the story of **God choosing to disarm**. Think about that. **God is disarming**, **laying down the weapon**, and actually, **letting the weapon be put to a lifegiving use**. Maybe there's a lesson here for all of us. ***Where are we being called to disarm, lay down our weapons, show restraint?***

Of course, in short order, **human beings go off the rails again**. **Noah will severely punish his youngest son** and **consign him** and **his descendants to be slaves** to **his two older brothers**. ***The son's sin; Ham's sin?*** He **saw his father Noah's nakedness when Noah was drunk**. I'm not sure *why that was Ham's fault and not Noah's*, and instead of taking responsibility, **Noah's shame ricochet's around,** *as it so often does***, and punishes the nearest person**. I **can't imagine Noah's lack of mercy pleased God**, but **God held true to the covenant**, and **didn't destroy Noah in return**.

Human beings will keep messing up, and God will keep working with us. We're all a work in progress, God included.

And then we have the story from **Mark 1**. Now then, we are only **8 verses into this gospel** when we come to today's passage. **Jesus has come to be baptized by John in the Jordan.** He has **heard that voice from heaven proclaim, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit, the Spirit mind you, immediately drove him out**, *with force*, like *expelled him into the wilderness*, into a *place far removed from others*, a *place deprived of the aid and protection of others*, a *desolate, lonely, deserted place*. **And Jesus was in this wilderness place forty days, tempted by Satan**, *tried by the adversary*; **and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

Why, seriously why, does the Spirit do this to Jesus??? There is another way of understanding this **being tempted** business; it also means *to experience*, *to learn by experience*.

The **Spirit understands that Jesus needs to learn something that can only be learned *by experience***. It's one thing to **hear that you are the Beloved**, **one in whom God is well pleased**, but it is **quite another to have that put to the test**.

With the freedom with which Jesus is endowed, how will he move with that core Beloved identity? How will we? As a Beloved, how will he deploy his power? How will we? We **don't know these things until we are in the wilderness stripped of all that is familiar and all that keeps us**

insulated. We **don't know, until we hit the desolate places**, just ***how* we will respond**. We **don't know what we will *do* until those adversarial forces assail us**, and my goodness, we *live in a world that seems to excel at being adversarial*.

I love that **Mark's version of this story doesn't name the temptations specifically**, but more lifts up ***the process of being tempted***. In **Mark's version**, we **get the wild beasts**. We may not be able to relate to **Matthew** and **Luke's temptations** to **turn stone to bread**, and **rule the kingdoms of the world**, or **throw ourselves off the pinnacle of the temple**—those may have always been **too weird, too big for us to imagine**—but **we ALL have our wild beasts with whom we have to contend**. Yet, **even amidst the wild beasts**, **there are always angels to be found**, **angels who *wait* on us**. Even **in the most desolate places in our lives**, **there are divine beings and messengers supporting us as we live through the experience before us**.

Where, in your life, are you **being tried** just now? What **wilderness** are you traversing? Where are you **feeling particularly vulnerable and exposed**, **without aid or protection**? Where are you **feeling lonely**? Where are you **questioning your identity as a Beloved**; where is that **core identity feeling tested and tried**?

What is coming at you that feels **adversarial**? Who or what are the **wild beasts** in your life, and who are the **angels** waiting on you with their **exquisite gift of presence and companionship**?

And circling back to our story from **Genesis**, **amidst all of this tempting and trying**, where might you be called to **disarm**, **lay down your weapons**, **lay down your defenses**, and **simply trust that God is with you**, and, hard though it is, **you will come through this experience with WISDOM** that is gained in no other way, **costly wisdom**, **sacrificial wisdom**, **wisdom that you will carry you through** the **next wilderness** because **wildernesses come our whole lives long**.

No sooner does **Jesus emerge from the wilderness that John is arrested**. It would have been **tempting for Jesus to head for the hills** and **leave this risky vocation behind**, but **the wilderness had changed him**. **What he had *heard***, he *now* **had *internalized*—HE WAS** the **BELOVED** and **this unshakeable identity permeated every cell of his being**. **HE KNEW** his **POWER**; **HE KNEW** his **FREEDOM**; and **HE KNEW** he would have to **CHOOSE** each and every day to **PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS** in a world that thrives on the *adversarial*. **Jesus' confidence** is unmistakable and unshakable; **Jesus came to Galilee**, full-on **proclaiming**, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe**, *trust*, **in the good news** that *you are beloved*, and *neither Satan*, *nor the wild beasts*, *nor the adversarial forces of this world* **can take that away**."

Siblings in Christ, your core identity is **set** and it is **solid**. You **don't need to defend *anything***; you are **free to love *everything***. And *in due course*, when *you've spent enough time in the wilderness*, you *even learn how to* ***befriend the wild beasts***.

Maybe this Lent, the **best thing we can do is disarm**, **lay down our bows** and **whatever else we use to defend ourselves** and **destroy the other**, **lay it all down**, and **learn whatever it is we need to learn in this wilderness** we're in. **God had to change** and **grow** and **evolve**. **Jesus** had to **wrestle** and **work out** what **his baptism** and **core identity meant**.

Now it's our turn. **Stand still**, **stay put**, **in whatever wilderness has been given you**. Talk with the **wild beasts**. Keep an eye on the **angels**. **Trust that the Spirit** is working its way with you. **Work out what it means for you to be a Beloved of God.**

And **in due course**, maybe forty days from now, maybe sooner, maybe longer, in the **fullness of time**, know that **you will emerge with a message of good news to proclaim** that **ONLY YOU can bear witness to** in this world.

Sometimes, **bearing witness to our wilderness journeys**, **living to tell the tale**, **IS the gospel** that **we most need to proclaim** and **that another needs to hear**. **When the time is right**, and **you'll know when**, **don't be afraid to share your message and tell your tale**. ***You just might be the wilderness angel another needs.*** Amen.

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