

Mark 1:10-15
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
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While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

I’ve always loved the calendars that the Sierra Club puts out—all those stunning photographs of pristine forests and waterfalls, soaring mountains, rugged desert spaces. They are gorgeous. Several years ago, though, my husband, Sam, pointed out something that has changed the way I see those images. He said, “Do you notice how there are never any people in them?”

Never any people. Of course, there are plenty of spaces in the world where there are no people present, or very few people. But the proliferation of “nature” imagery in which there are no people, perpetuates a sense of humans as being somehow *other* than part of the natural creation. As though nature were something for us to admire or rescue or control or exploit from the outside. As though it were only there for our benefit, and has no value aside from the pleasure or profit it provides us.

Think of the question, “If a tree falls in the forest, and there’s no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” This was first asked by George Berkeley, an 18th philosopher and Anglican bishop. His philosophical theory was that nothing exists outside of the mind, or human consciousness.¹ “If a tree falls in the forest, and there’s no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?”

Maybe we need to ask the tree. Or the squirrels and foxes and deer who scramble out of the way when it comes crashing down.

But besides the narcissism of that mindset is the false theology of the human place in creation. We aren’t apart *from* creation; we are a part *of* creation. We don’t conjure up trees and forests out of our consciousness—God created trees and forests and us, all out of the same stuff. In fact, our wellbeing is entirely dependent on the wellbeing of the rest of creation. Thinking otherwise has put the very existence of trees and forests and ourselves into peril.

This time right now, we are called upon to repent. With the same urgency that Jonah called upon the people of Nineveh, saying, “In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed!”; and with the same urgency that Paul proclaimed to the Corinthians that there could be no more business-as-usual, for “the present world is passing away;” we, too, must repent.

Jonah and Paul were addressing different crises, with different causes of destruction, but the urgency is the same. We must repent of the way we see

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Berkeley

creation, we must repent of the way we use creation, and we must repent now, or everything we care about will be destroyed. But where to begin?

Our passage from Mark gives us a clue. Last week, we were reading from John, in which the first thing Jesus does after his baptism is to go and gather disciples.

Mark's account is different, as is Matthew's and Luke's. In all three of what are called the Synoptic Gospels—"synoptic" because they're similar enough that they "see together"—in all three of them, the first thing that happens after Jesus is baptized, is that the Holy Spirit drives him out into the wilderness for forty days, where he is tempted by Satan.

Here, though, even the three Synoptics diverge. Matthew and Luke include an extended account of Satan's temptations—all of them having to do with the use and abuse of power--and add that Jesus fasted for all that time.

Mark is different. This account compresses the whole story into two verses: *At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.*

That's it. First, Mark says nothing of the content of Satan's temptations; and the use of the verb "took care of," which is often translated as "waited on," can also mean that the angels gave him food. The difference that really sticks out to me, though, is the phrase, "He was among the wild animals."

There is a sort of re-creation story going on here. In Genesis, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the water, God calls forth life and calls it good, and then, once humans are created, God sets them in the Garden to live in harmony with the rest of creation—which, of course, we fail to do.

Here, in Mark, the Spirit also moves over the water, swooping down to enter Jesus as he comes up from being baptized. God then calls Jesus Beloved—*good*-- then the Spirit sends him out into the wilderness to be among the wild animals.

I usually think of “wilderness” as meaning a barren place, but that isn’t necessarily the case. A wilderness is just a place that is wild. A place that hasn’t been altered by humans.

Jesus, re-born through the Spirit, goes back to the wild, unspoiled creation, to be with the other animals. He’s not saying anything to them. He’s not using them for anything. He’s just being with them, among them, in a scene that evokes the paradise of Eden or the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah.

It’s a reboot of something that had gone awry; a second chance at a harmonious relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

Only after he has established this harmony with the rest of creation does Jesus then go to gather human disciples.

It’s a compelling image; and now, what about us?

There is much that has gone awry in human-to-human relationships. There are more “isms” we need to counteract than we can probably even name. And it *is* our task as a gospel people to bring good news of a different way of living with one another and with God.

But we won’t be able to demonstrate a different way of life with other people, unless we have completely changed the way we relate to the rest of creation. It is in relation to creation that we developed our twisted ideas of dominance—ideas that have led to colonialism and genocide; racism and chattel slavery and segregation; misogyny and rape and female subjugation; homophobia and transphobia and all sorts of violence against LGBTQ folks. It’s a pretty short route from thinking that the planet is at our disposal, to thinking that other people are, too.

So perhaps, Jesus should be our model. There’s a thought! Perhaps we need to be reborn to be wild.

Remember the start of this pandemic, when everything just shut down, and the human world abruptly went quiet? For those few weeks, remember how we suddenly started noticing animals that had previously escaped our attention? Remember how we saw the brightness of birds for the first time, or became so acutely aware of their song?

And, like many of you, Sam and I sought the solace of pets. They’re not wild, exactly—at least, not most of the time!—but they are a kind of a bridge between us and the wild creatures.

Our new awareness of the world outside our windows, and our deepened bonds with the other creatures in our own homes, were essential to our mental health during a crazy time. In the same way healing our relationship with the rest of nature is our best hope for regaining the spiritual wholeness necessary for healthy, human relationships; and essential to the future, physical survival of us all.

In showing us how to be among the wild animals—not above, but among them—Jesus shows us a way toward healing that will help us to embody the good news: good news that can save our ecosystem and transform our human relationships. Without that change, disaster is inevitable and it's coming at us like a freight train. But if we embrace that change—if, with true repentance, we live that change fully, then, who knows:

as the present form of this world passes away, what we may find is a rebirth of goodness for every human everywhere, and for all creatures, great and small.