



FIRST
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ANGELS IN THE WILDERNESS

Exodus 13:17-22; Mark 1:9-13

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One dark winter evening when we were living in Indianapolis, I flew into the airport only to find that, while I was away, there had been a big snow and hard freeze. Of course, I had parked out in the open in the long-term lot. When I got to my car, there was a huge pile of refrozen snow thrown up by the snowplow – blocking my car. Without a shovel, I did what I could to scrape the snow from behind the wheels. I worked up a sweat digging at the snow with whatever I could find and rocking the car back and forth in the hope of getting traction. I was stuck in the cold, wet parking lot. In the frustration of that long winter night, I thought about how often I have been stuck in my own spiritual life, wrestling with some problem, fretting over a mistake, or struggling with some personal failure, unable to move forward. No matter how hard I try to dig out of one of life's ruts or push my way over some barrier, I can't seem to break free.

Mark tells us that, immediately after his baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness where he is tempted by the Devil. Jesus, who in his baptism is declared to be God's Beloved Son, faces all the trials and temptations that we face in our ordinary human life. His time of temptation is no stage act. It is real. If we read the other gospel accounts of the temptation of Jesus, we learn that he experiences real hunger and thirst. Surrounded by wild beasts, I suspect he has to sleep with one eye open. He knows physical and spiritual exhaustion, but he also knows who

he is. He knows his true identity as a Beloved Child of God. In the midst of temptation, he remains true to his identity.

When we face temptation, we recognize how easily we fall into difficulty. When someone hurts us, we burn with anger; when others have more than we have, we are overwhelmed by envy; when we are afraid, we shut ourselves off from others; when we are consumed by our hungers, we betray our loved ones; and when we think resources are scarce, we hoard what we have. How easily we fail to be the kind of person we so long to be. We forget who we are. We fall into sin, weeping and gnashing our teeth in the night.

The Gospel story of Jesus in the Wilderness is given to us not to point out our failure, but to show us the possibility of overcoming temptation. When we are tempted to be less than God wants us to be, we look to Jesus to find our true humanity. In Jesus, we see the way forward. Even in the Wilderness, we too are God's beloved children.

Remember when the children of Israel fled from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and began their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness before they reached the Promised Land? God did not abandon them. Even in the Wilderness, they too were God's beloved children. God did not leave them. The Bible tells us that God was with them, reassuring them and leading the way with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. No

matter what struggles, dangers, and difficulties they faced, God would be with them.

When Jesus is in the Wilderness facing the wild beasts of temptation, God does not abandon him. The Wilderness story ends with the beautiful - yet often overlooked - words, "and the angels waited on him." The angels...

Friends, we have been in the Wilderness a long time. We miss our friends, our classmates, our families, and our normal activities. These are strange days. Who would have thought, a year ago, that we would still be experiencing so much isolation, frustration, sickness, and loneliness – so much weariness of mind, body, and soul? Children and youth miss their friends, activities, and normal school routines. Parents and teachers are weary and need support as they struggle to encourage their discouraged children and students. We know the blessing and curse of Zoom. Who would have thought that we would still be worshipping virtually? A year ago, who would have thought that our nation would see 28,000,000 cases of coronavirus and 500,000 deaths? The end is not yet in sight. As we begin the season of Lent, we begin it in the Wilderness of this present time.

God has not abandoned us. We are not alone. God's ministering angels are all around us. When I think back on that night when I was stuck in a frozen airport parking lot, I would have been there all night if someone

had not come along with a shovel, lent a hand, and helped dig me out.

I suspect you have found it to be true that whenever we feel discouraged or overwhelmed by the challenges before us, God always seems to send just the right person to encourage us, write a note, carry a burden, help with a difficult situation, and even correct us when we need it. There are those folks who pray for us and remind us that even in the Wilderness, we are beloved children of God. Over the years, I have come to see these friends and strangers as God's ministering angels. Without their care, I could not be faithful in the face of temptation.

The secret of living in the Wilderness as if we are in the Promised Land is knowing that Jesus comes to us through all these ministering angels who bear our burdens, hold our hands, feed our souls, and stand with us. It is interesting that when Mark tells us that the angels "served" him, he is using the same word from which we get the word "deacon". You might say that these angels were the first deacons of the church. The secret of living in the Wilderness is found not in relying on our own strength or in trusting our own feeble resources. The secret is found in looking to Jesus in whom we see our true humanity. Jesus comes to us in these flesh and blood angels who set us free and help us find the way forward.

A dear friend in a former church had overcome a great deal in her life to become a successful administrator. She had grown up in a deeply troubled family. In her adult life, she had worked hard to overcome her anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. She knew what it was to

live in the Wilderness and face the temptation of falling into believing her parents' incessant, demeaning criticism. One night, the darkness almost overwhelmed her. She was overcome by the wild beasts of internalized, relentless psychological attacks. Her loving husband called their friends to help. Her friends gathered around her. They encouraged her, loved her, and prayed with her as she got the professional help she needed to discover again her own true identity as a beloved child of God. I will always think of those friends who saved her life as God's ministering angels who came in the Wilderness of her life.

Through these angels we come to see how to live as beloved children of God. Through them, the Holy Spirit gives us the power to live in a world of trouble as Jesus lived. Dr. Shirley Guthrie has written that Jesus teaches us...

that to be truly human in the image of God is not to possess some intellectual, moral, or spiritual capacity within ourselves; [our humanity] is realized only in... community or fellowship with others outside ourselves. We cannot be human by ourselves in independent, self-sufficient loneliness. Only as we discover the meaning of our very existence in relatedness to God and fellow human beings can we be truly human (Christian Doctrine, p. 198).

We begin the season of Lent together. This year, it is indeed a journey through the Wilderness. Wild beasts abound, but so do the ministering angels. Our journey is not a solitary one, but a journey together in which we encourage one another, lift each other up, and provide for one another. All these angels are the

ones who help us when we are stuck and who enable us to move forward to embrace the life God has for us to live. Together we discover our true humanity as children of God.

You have welcomed Bunny and me with such warmth, grace, and kindness. This past Monday, some of the women of the church organized a drive-through welcome event where folks left notes, cards, and recommendations about their favorite places to shop, eat, walk, and visit in Spartanburg. While they were gathered under the portico, a woman with five children who had been kicked out of the home by a family member walked up. The portico was a shelter from the cold, wet weather. The gathered women focused their attention on her, made a phone call, connected her with another church member who arranged lodging for the family in a motel. At the same time, contacts were made with the children's school, with food resources, and the opportunities for longer-term housing. In the midst of an event to welcome us to the church, this community of faith turned its focus to become ministering angels to a family in desperate need and homeless in the Wilderness. Nothing could make us feel more welcome and more at home than knowing you, too, are God's angels.

Jesus teaches us how to live in the Wilderness as if we are in the Promised Land. We are God's beloved children. All around us are God's ministering angels.