

## Lent I

Old Testament Genesis 9 : 8-17  
Gospel Mark 1 : 9-15

The Lenten season begins.

And we hear Jesus begins.

And in the beginning, according to Mark, the Spirit 'drove' Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus didn't choose the wilderness. The Spirit of God drove him, compelled him, *forced* him, into the desolation of a wild and unsafe place.

Most of the time, we don't choose to enter the wilderness. We don't volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror. Yet the wilderness happens, anyway.

Whether it comes to us in the guise of a devastating pandemic, a hospital waiting room, a broken relationship, a hurting child, a sudden death, or a loss of faith, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our heart steps. It insists on itself. And sometimes it is God's own Spirit who drives us there.

In the startling economy of God, even a dangerous desert can become holy. Even our wilderness wanderings can reveal the divine.

At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was. That was the easy part. The much harder part came in the wilderness, when he had to face every vicious assault on that truth. With the memory of his Father's voice Jesus had to learn how to be God's beloved in a lonely wasteland.

Maybe we, like Jesus, need time in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God's beloved. There were wild beasts in the wilderness, as there were angels. As there are angels.

Whatever occurred out in the ark prepared Noah to be who he was to be on earth for the rest of his days.

Whatever occurred out in the wilderness prepared Jesus to be who he was to be on earth for the rest of his days.

Although it may not feel it in our wilderness times, it is the time of preparing us to know who we are, to know God is with us, and we are ready to commence, the rest of our living. To be who we are to be on earth for the rest of our days. Our wilderness times will probably not be under the stars, in an ark, or in the heat, in the rain or the dirt.

Wildernesses of today are more to be found in familiar places such as your address, your family, in crowds and on your own.

It is in the wilderness we come to know the unnerving truth that we can be loved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be loved and vulnerable at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is strong, not soft. Salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time. A long time.

When you are in the wilderness, be there. Don't run away, hide, give up.

Pay attention, be in the present moment of your wilderness. Knowing Satan is not the only one to be found in the wilderness. The spirit and the angels are with you. Even in the land of shadow and starvation, even in the place where the wild beasts roamed, God's agents of love and care lingered. Even in the grimmest places, God abides, and somehow, without reason or explanation, help comes. Rest comes. Solace comes. Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we prefer, yet they come.

We need the Jesus of the desert. We need to know that he wrestled with real demons and real dangers during those forty days of temptation. As alluring as it might be to cling to a divine superhero, we need the Jesus who endured a terrain where the Holy Spirit, Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels resided together. Alone, we'll never survive such a dangerous place. With a companion who knows the way, though, we will.

I wonder what Jesus's angels looked like.  
Did they manifest as winged creatures from heaven?  
As comforting breezes across the sun-scorched hills?  
As a trickle of water for his parched throat?  
As the swirl of constellations on a clear, cloudless night?

What do your angels look like?  
Do you recognise them when they show up?

When they minister to you, hold you, brace you, do you hear a new version of God's voice, calling you 'beloved?'  
If yes, then what would it be like to enter into someone else's barren desert right now, and become an angel for their journey?

As we begin our journey into Lent, may we experience the companionship of the Christ whose vulnerability became his strength. May we enter with courage the deserts we can't choose or avoid. May our long stints amidst the wild beasts teach us who we really are - the precious and beautiful children of God. And when the angels in all their sweet and secret guises whisper the name 'beloved' into our ears, may we listen, and believe them.

*Wendy*