

“A Wild Beast of a Season”
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Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15

Both of today's scriptures greet us with wild beasts. In Mark's gospel, Jesus leaves his baptism and goes straight into the wilderness for forty days, with the wild beasts as his company, and there the devil tempted him. In Genesis, God establishes God's covenant with Noah and his family— but not only them; God also includes in the covenant “every living thing... the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you.” For all these creatures of God's making, God displays the rainbow in the sky and promises the grace that the waters will never again destroy all flesh.

These two scriptures, with their wild beasts, opening our first Sunday of the Lenten season reminds us that this will be a wild beast of a season! It is for us personally, but it is also tied to the larger scope of God's creation. What we do in this time and with this time impacts all beings.

God's rainbow appears to Noah— and the beasts— following a storm that flooded the earth for 40 days and nights. Flood narratives were common in ancient writings from the near east, including the Mesopotamian Battle of Gilgamesh. Perhaps these stories remember an actual, catastrophic flood that ended life all around, if there were enough people to survive who could tell that story. Or maybe these flood myths served to explain to an agrarian society the rise and fall of waters that are far beyond human control. Perhaps they also speak to the earth's need to cleanse itself, and to start new.

The waters of baptism offer this, as does the season of 40 days and nights Jesus spends alone in the wilderness. Why forty days? The number 40 holds great significance in God's story with God's people. Noah's ark floated for 40 days and 40 nights. The Hebrews wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, as they shook off the mental and spiritual shackles of slavery that they carried from Egypt, and learned to live as God's freed people. Did you know that God commanded the prophet Ezekiel to lie on his right side for 40 days, one for each year of Judah's guilt? And, Ezekiel had to lie on his left side for 390 days, to bear the guilt of the house of Israel? I wonder if a prophet came to us in these times, how many days would she have to lie down to bear the guilt of Leonia? How 'bout Teaneck? Don't let get me started on you other neighboring towns!

A few weeks ago, some of us went to paint in the second floor of Oelhaf House while the residents were out. If the walls could talk, they would tell stories of struggle and survival, of threat and of thriving. However, we would like the chance to let each new resident who arrives at Oelhaf house see for herself and her children clean and fresh walls, walls waiting for how she

will tell *her* story and whisper it back to her in affirming and empowering ways. Maybe that's too much to ask for a wall, but we tried. We managed to get the hallway done, and I have to say, that new coat of paint really brightened up the area. We began painting in one of the bedrooms that has yet to have a new resident. However, we noticed there were parts of the wall that needed spackling. There were old screws in the wall. There were remnants of a child's foam sticker display still crusted on the walls. We knew there would need to be much more prep work before we could give it the kind of paint job that would make it look fresh and bright and welcoming for a new resident looking to become the author, rather than the subject, of her own story. And so, we sanded away the stickers. We plastered over some holes. There is still more work to do.

Lent invites us to consider what work we need to do. Spiritually speaking, where are the snags and holes, the sticker display that no longer represents us? What repair do we need to do to prepare God for the gloss and shine of resurrection on us? How can we make our lives bright and clean and welcoming for what the Spirit might design with us in our lives?

In the wilderness, all is exposed before God: our snags, our holes, our grime. And though you may find it troubling to be laid bare like that before God, let me suggest that it is actually a very loving thing God asks us to do: to trust God with all that we are, and with all that we *aren't*, and believe God will love us and receive us. What a loving thing to do back to God when we then proclaim that we are willing to partner with God to become something new.

After Jesus left the wilderness, his cousin John, who had baptized him, was arrested. Jesus then gave his first sermon that Mark's gospel reports. It sounded a lot like the way John had spoken. He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This means that, as commentator Matthew Myer Boulton describes it, "despite how things might seem, God's active reign of love, justice, and peace is breaking into the world here and now; in fact, it's so near you can see it and hear it and smell it and reach out and touch it... because of this nearness, we're called to repentance; the underlying Greek term here is *metanoia* (*meta*, 'change' + *noia*, 'mind'); today we might say 'change of heart' or 'change of life.'"

Now, maybe you are wondering what you might change. As for me, I will look to the wild beasts. Because, if a dove can tell Noah that 40 days of flooding are over, and if the wild beasts can keep Jesus company in the wilderness even when he is tempted by the devil, maybe I should start listening to God's creatures, too. And so, last night, I saw a skunk sashay across my street as I rolled home from an errand. In our region, skunk mating season is February-March; I've seen 3 in the past week! So this skunk was looking to woo some other lucky skunk. Maybe the skunk can teach me to be more attentive to my marriage. In Overpeck Park I have recently seen two eagles: one mature, and the other a juvenile. They are so grand and majestic, and it is a wonder to me that they come back to this park every year, this park that was, from the 1950's to the early 2000's, a massive, toxic landfill. The eagles give me hope for my more toxic

tendencies. They remind me that I am not beyond redemption, and that when we are open to restoration, life can flourish.

Maybe animals won't speak to *you* this Lent, but consider the possibility that God is trying to get your attention in a particular way this season. As we prepare to approach the table to share in Christ's meal, may the bread and the juice be for us an attention-grabber: something that awakens our senses so that we can listen in this holy season, and be changed.