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Lent 1 B
AJH+

“...and the angels waited on him.”

“Do we really have to do Lent this year?” More than a few faithful followers of Jesus have posed this question in recent days and weeks.

To be sure, it is not without its merits. After all, one might follow-up, haven't we been living in a sort of extended Lent for the past year? Perhaps we've had enough fasting from the people, places, and things we hold dear. Perhaps we've had enough self-reflection, after looking at ourselves on Zoom screens day after day. Perhaps we've had enough Lent...

In an article entitled, “Must we do Lent this year?,” my friend and seminary professor James Farwell reminds us that,

Lent is, in its roots and at its core, a time to renew and deepen our commitment to our baptismal life... *In what year, then, could the keeping of Lent be MORE appropriate?* Our mortality is in front of us daily. Our sins are everywhere in evidence. This year, hard as it has been, is different in degree but *not* in kind from the human condition we ever inhabit.

Perhaps, then, the invitation we receive from the Church, to a holy period of self-reflection, abstinence, and penitence, is not what we might want, but is exactly what we most deeply need. Forty days to once again take stock of our lives, purge some of the unhealthy, re-arrange the furniture of our souls, and begin, anew, the baptized life of following in the way of Jesus.

In the days following his own baptism, an immersion into the fullness of our humanity, our Lord Jesus went on a forty days' journey in the wilderness, the Gospel writers tell us. Matthew and Luke fill in some details of what he encountered in the desert wasteland, but Mark does not tell us nearly as much, noting only,

“He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

In the barren landscape of the wilderness, Jesus encountered the tempting presence of the evil one, that nagging voice that proclaims scarcity, doom, gloom, and impossibility. Mark does not tell us what Satan has to say to Jesus, perhaps illuminating the reality that the voice of evil is one we know all too well, a presence with whose ploys we are already versed as humans living in a broken world.

In the seeming emptiness of the desert wilderness, Jesus lived among the wild beasts, those untamed creatures that thrive in the harsh environment of dangerous terrain. Before dismissing these creatures as undomesticated beings, to be feared, we do well to remember that there is much we can learn about our own faith journeys from the perseverance and resourcefulness of these so-called wild beasts.

The evil one and wild beasts – no surprises there; after all, we expect to find these in the wilderness of Jesus’ forty-day temptation. Notice, however, that there is more accompanying our Lord in the desert beyond the Jordan River.

Mark the Gospel writer tells us that, “the angels waited on him.”

There are angels in the wilderness. We should not pass by this statement too quickly, as though it is a passing detail Mark just happened to include. This is significant; miraculous, even. Angels, the messengers of God, accompany, support and nourish Jesus in the desert of temptation.

Jesus’ encounters in the wilderness are not unique. While we, twenty-first century people of the American south, may not find ourselves on a trek through an arid, parched desert, we do travel through and live among wilderness places.

Collectively, we are on a forty-day journey in the season of Lent – a season in which the Church bids us look deep within ourselves, to uncover the brokenness and sinfulness we do our very best to hide, to repent of all that separates us from the love of God and relationship with one another, to rediscover the divine light that burns within each of us, the beloved life proclaimed at our own baptisms.

Bluntly, this is a hard pilgrimage, if done intently, full of self-discovery and a re-ordering of priorities. But, the wilderness experience is not limited to a Lenten voyage; you and I know that all too well.

There are many places that look and feel like the desert of temptation and divine absence in our lives – an addiction that goes unnamed and unacknowledged, insidiously destroying relationships with loved ones; an illness whose outcome is yet undetermined, producing a fear and anxiety that cannot be measured by any normal standard.

For friends in Texas and throughout places of the southeast, the wilderness has looked less like a desert and more like the arctic – a frozen landscape absent of power sources for heating or clean water for drinking, with utility bills soaring past one’s ability to fathom, much less pay.

In all these wilderness places of our lives, whether a self-imposed spiritual discipline or an uninvited sojourn in a barren land, the Gospel of our Lord invites us to hear again, God’s good news – there is no place of temptation, no wilderness, real or metaphorical, in which the accompanying grace of God’s great love is not to be found.

If, even in the desert wilderness, Jesus was accompanied by the angels, who ministered to his needs, then surely, even in our wilderness, we, also, are accompanied by the divine presence of the One whose love and mercy cannot, will not let us go.

Dear friends, there is no place, no setting, no depth to which you and I can go that we will not find, already there, the abiding love of God, revealed to us in Christ Jesus. Divine presence overcoming our perception of absence, again and again.

“Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

May the angels of God’s mercy accompany us, wherever we find ourselves, and wait upon us, too. Amen.