Lent I Year B: “Humans in the Wild”

February 19, 2018
St. Andrew’s Episcopal School (LS/MS Chapel)
February Faculty Inservice

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer.

Good morning! My, what lovely readings the season of Lent brings us.

In this 2018 we have survived the three long years of January only to find ourselves with only 9 days left of February. The jolt is surprising, and if you have felt at times like this is the time and place where the wheels fall off the wagon or at the very least begin to loosen, you’re not alone.

And if you don’t feel that, consider that last week alone started with a full moon and ended with the Lunar New Year and had Valentine’s Day, Ash Wednesday, and Maha Shivaratri on the same day. What a time to be alive.
This is a time of latent change, where the shortened month is filled with things that make us stop and catch our breath only to look around and realize that we’re in a new place, a place that needs our attention.

It is fitting, then that we find ourselves in a season of timed reflection. The forty days and forty nights of Lent have, for thousands of years, given people an opportunity to stop and catch our breath and look around at where we are.

On Jordan’s stream, there are reeds taller than you and I standing on each other’s shoulders. The river is more of a creek on a good day but could easily be a crick. The water is green and silty, the bottom stirred up easily by the shuffling of feet. Most of us would probably be able to stand in the middle of the river in some parts, but not fully, just enough that our heads could tilt back with our ears below the water line but our eyes above.

It looks for all the world like a nest. The reeds sway and swoop in the wind and you could easily be surrounded by them, with the water rolling gently beneath you and the sun above you evaporating the droplets off your face. You know these places.

It’s the places where your breathing moves in harmony with the wind and the water. Where you feel small and large in the connectedness of things. It is easy to think that you could become new, in a small or large sense, once you enter and emerge from these waters. It is simple to be delighted to know that
you are beloved when you are caressed by water and wind and sun. It is an easy place to stay.

But we never get to stay in the safe places long enough, and only our memories of the sun and the rush of the reeds and the life of the water sustain us as we come out onto the banks. We have to remind ourselves of our belovedness, repeat it doggedly like a mantra, instead of it being something we hear and know and accept in our bones.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus is propelled from the waters of the Jordan straight into the wilderness. A place He wanders about in for 40 days and 40 nights, with temptation and creation and preservation personified for company. Satan and the wild beasts and the angels keep Him company, and I imagine He narrated the whole thing like David Attenborough did for Planet Earth.

The wilderness, a place that manages to be stark and sustaining simultaneously, is incredibly important for a prophet’s journey. It is only by being in the wilderness that the leaders of people are able to know what they need to proclaim and gain strength enough to share it.

This wilderness is the desolation of the desert, and “wilderness” is used not only to describe a physical location, but a physical condition, too. A person, a people, can live in the wilderness from the outside in or dwell in from the
inside out. Those elements of temptation and creation and preservation walking around with Jesus walk around in us, too.

The Jordan River is visible for miles in the desert, the valley carved out not only by time but by people lets you see the promise of quenched thirst from deceptive distances. Walking away from it, you are assured of the knowledge that it’s there behind you as you look over your shoulder. Walking towards it, you can be deceived by how far away you are.

The safety that you would feel in the river feels impossible once you rise from the banks. Never more so than today. The Jordan is bordered by the West Bank (it’s where it gets its name) to the West and the Golan Heights and Jordan to the East. It’s disputed territory, and its banks are drowning in long held fear and anger and mistrust of neighbor. For all of the beauty of filling connected and beloved in the water and amongst the rushes, rising upon the banks makes you shiver in feeling very much alone and very much exposed.

Today, when you climb up from the banks of the Jordan and head west, you would walk across a doubled-down wilderness. There are active minefields for miles. It’s astonishingly disorienting. Tell me, how you can sustain a feeling of belovedness when every step you take is a matter of life and death? How can you feel the wonder of creation and a sense of protection when the temptation to stop moving at all becomes paramount?
What happens when we feel that wilderness inside?

And my real question: how do we help lead the children entrusted to us through the wilderness? When we’re all there in the wilderness, how do we know what to proclaim and gain strength enough to share it?

I read this poem this week and I can’t get it out of my head:

Collective Nouns for Humans in the Wild
by Kathy Fish

A group of grandmothers is a tapestry. A group of toddlers, a jubilance (see also: a bewailing). A group of librarians is an enlightenment. A group of visual artists is a bioluminescence. A group of short story writers is a Flannery. A group of musicians is — a band.

A resplendence of poets.
A beacon of scientists.
A raft of social workers.

A group of first responders is a valiance. A group of peaceful protesters is a dream.
A group of special education teachers is a transcendence. A group of neonatal ICU nurses is a divinity. A group of hospice workers, a grace.

Humans in the wild, gathered and feeling good, previously an exhilaration, now: a target.

A target of concert-goers.
A target of movie-goers.
A target of dancers.

A group of schoolchildren is a target.

I am sure you remember when the wildness of this week plunged into the wilderness.
On Wednesday, another young white man walked into his school and killed his classmates and his teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The children killed were 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 years old. Their protectors? 35, 37, and 49.

In the almost 20 years since the Columbine High School massacre, one ongoing study by the Washington Post says that over 150,000 students in 170 schools have experienced shootings. That’s a conservative number, not including things like suicides, accidents, or after-school assaults.

When our humans in the wild are targets, what wilderness doesn’t feel like a minefield?

One of the first photos out of Parkland this past Wednesday was a mother with ashes still in a cross on her forehead clutching her child to her. Life and death felt inside and out and exposed and raw. Belovedness rising up and tangling with fear. Temptation and creation and preservation in a brutal wilderness of the land and of the heart.

I’ve made the transition from student to teacher since Columbine. I remember my first active shooter drill. I don’t know when my last one will be. I used to think about what I would hide behind and now I think about how to hide children. I think about escape routes and barricades and whether or not stained glass would help or hurt.
The wilderness is around us and in us, and yet we are responsible for teaching the children entrusted to us how to name it and know it and navigate it. There is their wilderness and our shared one. We help lead them through the wilderness that we have traveled before, passing through again and again the minefields of childhood and adolescence. In all our time in the wilderness, we learn what good news is worth proclaiming and build up our strength to share it.

There are days when we stop to catch our breath because we have watched something explode and see that we are far away from the safety of the shoreline, and we feel the partch in our throats and the tight dryness of our skins and the heat pushing on us from above and below and we wonder - how did we get here?

And in that wilderness we turn and see the line of young faces behind us and with us. When for all the world we cannot begin to remember what belovedness feels like, we remind them of theirs. We encourage and guide and correct and teach and hold them accountable. And as we remind them of the truth of waters beyond the wilderness, it echoes within us, and slowly the reality of our profound interconnectedness surfaces and settles more firmly in our hearts. We regain our strength.

The wilderness is not a place to be unaware. It requires the honesty to be filled with awe and wonder when we can and also the honesty to change direction when we’re in a bad way. It is, as a condition, a time of stark wonder and
assessment. “How did I get here?” is not the question we’re seeking to answer, but instead, “Where am I?” and “Where do I want to go?”

There is another name for humans in the wild, gathered together and feeling good, and it is kingdom of God. Because, you see, life isn’t all just water and wilderness. The wilderness reminds us of what we learned in the water so that we can become strong enough to do what we are meant to do.

The truth of the water is that you are beloved, divinely loved, and the truth of the wilderness is that you are driven to dwell in the barren places because it is where you can listen best to where you are called to be.

And the same Spirit that puts in your heart that sense of love, of giving love, of a love that builds and builds and strengthens and strengthens and binds and binds pulls you out into the places where you can only rely on that as a truth-as something worth proclaiming, and as something to live by.

And this love that builds itself between us builds itself into something. Jesus spent His time in the wilderness and came out strengthened to proclaim that the kingdom of God had come near.

The kingdom, as it turns out, is like the wilderness - it’s a word used to describe a physical reality and a physical condition. The kingdom is a place and a society, but, more importantly for us, the kingdom is about dwelling in
the state of belovedness. The kingdom is about giving love and when Jesus says it has come near He means the intimate, imminent presence of a love that builds is right here [in our hearts]. It is up to us to build it with our hands.

We are in the wilderness, no doubt about it. And we have to listen. We have to feel and know and name the good, and the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly. We have to be willing to discover the things we must change. And we have to build up the strength to build up the beloved community every day, right here at St. Andrew’s.

The wilderness will try to convince us that we are alone, that there is no redemption, and that there is no hope. It will seek to name us as targets. But the wilderness is no match for the wild power of love.

We will be prepared in this wilderness, beloved, because we are teachers and coaches and guides and protectors. We will be prepared in this wilderness because we are entrusted with the lives of children. We will be prepared in this wilderness because the kingdom of God, the foundation of love and ever more love, has come near in our hearts.

And this wilderness will not last in the face of what are building, together, every day, with love. That is the good news. May you be healed by it so that you will be healing. May you find hope in it so that you will be hopeful. May you be blessed in proclaiming it so that you will be a blessing.
Let us pray:
Almighty God, you have blessed us with the
joy and care of children growing up in an
unsteady and confusing world:
Give us calm strength and patient
wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love
whatever is just and true and good,
As we walk in the wilderness toward the promise of your kingdom. Amen.