

Lent 1, Year B 2024
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Genesis 9:8-17 Psalm 25:1-9 1 Peter 3:18-22 Mark 1:9-15

Jesus “*saw the heavens torn apart,*”

And that “torn apart” verb is the same word Mark uses for the ripping of the temple curtain at the time of Jesus’ death on the cross.

“And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

It is not a gentle word. What sort of force might it take to open the clouds, walls, and depths of heaven? And out of that violent tearing God’s voice comes through:

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.”

God went to tremendous lengths to declare Jesus as God’s son, to tear apart the division of the people from the holiest part of the temple. That tearing means that nothing remains that might stop us from having direct access to God. Nothing separates us from the love and mercy of God. Nothing.

But even there being nothing in the way of us reaching God, of heaven open to earth, did not keep Jesus from being driven into the wilderness. The same spirit that had just descended upon him drove Jesus into chaos and danger. Can it be? In our own baptisms, we are marked as Christ’s own children, forever. We might expect that life will be different and most likely easier once we have turned to God in baptism and back to God in our confessions of sin. We intentionally turn toward God over and over again; what, then, is the purpose of being thrown into the wilderness?

Mark does not tell us, and we weren’t there, so we do not know for sure why Jesus endured the wilderness. We do know that we have wilderness places of our own. Today’s wilderness probably doesn’t look like the wilderness in which Jesus found himself. It doesn’t take much stretching of our imaginations to think about the wilderness places into which we drive ourselves through our own poor choices, by greed, our egos, those things done and left undone. For a sobering reminder of the wilderness of our making, turn to page 267 in the BCP at any time of the year; read through our many sins. Add to that wilderness those calamities of life put upon us: illness, injustice, war, a multitude of temptations, rampant villains with powerful guns in our schools, homes, and streets. The wilderness is indeed vast and dangerous.

Even more powerful than the wilderness, however, is that we, too, are God’s beloved. And Mark writes our reality; just as for Jesus,

“the angels attended to him.”

Angels might attend to us with food, clothing, prayer, or meals; with companionship, ingenuity to help us out of our dangerous places; with hope, medicine, knowledge, and the assurance that God is with us. Coming out of the wilderness, Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is near. He

had just experienced the presence of God's kingdom in the midst of danger. Jesus' words are reassurance for us that no matter what happens, God is present; angels wait on us, care for us, hold us when we cannot stand or bear our burdens or pain or sorrow. Quite possibly one of the hardest things to give up for Lent is our thought that sometimes God forgets about us or ignores our pleas. Almost from the time of creation, God stretches out God's arms like a rainbow through our savior, Jesus Christ, who stretched out his arms upon a cross.

As children of God, we are not spared the perils of life. God's love for us took Jesus to his death and to his glory. We will need all of Lent, all of our lives, to think and pray about and imagine that kind of love, the kind of love in which we are truly never alone, that angels surround us. In giving up our fear that we are alone, maybe what we take on this Lent is seeing those angels in our lives. Those angels, biblical symbols for God's presence, are our hope in this world. They are a form of heaven opening to us. Eyes that see and lips that declare those angels bring hope to a Lenten world. They bring the presence of God into our consciousness and reality. What a wonderful practice to take on during Lent: to declare our hope to all of our neighbors.

God takes death and turns it into life. God who forms humankind out of the dust of the earth has breathed life into us. For God and for Jesus, the wilderness is not the end of the story, but a beginning. As a beginning, what will come out of your wilderness time of Lent? What will begin? We can resent giving up something, or we can use our "giving up" as a reminder of all that God provides. We can give up resentment and petty grievances and see the angels who attend to us. What if we participate in this specific wilderness time named Lent and journey with it and in it **together**. As a faith community, let's journey together into and through a holy Lent. Encourage one another to take on a discipline. Provide eyes to see the angels. Support one another in our disciplines; in so doing, we strengthen not only ourselves but the whole body of Christ. See the angels and not the chaos. See through every danger with eyes that know that Jesus is everywhere, for he has lived this desert time ahead of us.

That is our Lenten task. We know that God made a covenant with every living creature that God will never again destroy the whole earth. God keeps God's covenants. How will we, bound together by creation, by our baptismal covenant, and by prayerfully committing to a holy Lent, live into our part as individuals and as a faithful community of Christians? In all of our wilderness places, those we choose and those or put upon us, pray into the challenge of finding God within them. Look for the angels who are attending to us in every situation, in every wilderness. Turn toward one another, and together turn toward God. Share the presence of God, of Jesus, that you see around you. Give us your vision that see the angels where we do not. Literally walk with each other this Lent. Share with our lips and our lives our awareness of our belovedness, of your belovedness in God.

The holy work of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, is a beginning born of living through every wilderness. I invite you, with me and together, to a holy Lent.