

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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Angels and Wild Beasts

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Let us pray . . .

I'm not sure I could have been more blue as I began writing this sermon. I'd dreamt about my mom for the first time in a while. The sky was a flat, heavy grey while rain fell on the snow. I had a depressing and wistful album playing in the background because it helped me get to the place inside that I was trying to access in order to find these words. I was under quite the cloud and yet, in its own strange way, I knew God

was stirring and this was another moment that moved me closer to God and all manner of mysteries that surround that Sacred Naming.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, a time that invites us into the places in life that, while they might feel heavy or hard to access, have the makings of our formation in them.

Lent is the season that asks us to explore the memory and our understandings of Jesus. Lent encourages us to set aside time to reflect on his life, his journey, what he came to teach us, and what it might mean and look like to follow him.

Now Jesus was able to show us the way as he began his ministry *because* he'd first had his own trials during his wilderness experiences.

In February 10th's "Christian Century," author MaryAnn McKibben Dana reflects on Jesus' baptism and testing from Mark's Gospel,

reminding us that the same Spirit who alighted on Jesus as he rises from the waters, “now beats its wings and nips at Jesus’ head, driving him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.”

Important to Dana's point is that “the wild” its very self is with Jesus. He is attended to by angels *and* wild beasts and that perhaps the *lack of* tameness gave him the strength he needed to come up against the relentless Adversary.

While today’s Gospel lesson is Mark’s account of Jesus being led into the wilderness for 40 days of testing — because it is a classic First Sunday of Lent reading — Alan read our focus Scripture — which I think is critical to setting the cosmic tone when it gets down to wilderness experiences, testing and trials, being lost and finding our way when we are disturbed by the dark and relentless places in our lives.

God makes no secret of it — it is right there in the beginning of verse 14

When I bring clouds

Maybe Mark's Gospel writer understood this too, but in order to connect with his audience, used other words to mean the bringing of clouds — words like wilderness, Satan, Adversary and testing.

Do you know how clouds form?

Actually, I know a few of you do, but for the rest of us, clouds form when H₂O — water molecules — get extra energy from a heat source like the Sun or from other water molecules running into them. Then the liquid part of water changes into a gas called water vapor and the water vapor escapes into the atmosphere and gathers together. When the air contains as much water vapor as it can hold — which is called a saturation point — we see the results as clouds or fog.

Saturation can be reached in two ways. First, through evaporation, where moisture accumulates until it reaches the maximum amount the volume of air can hold. Boom. Clouds or fog forms.

Condensation is the other way. Condensation happens when the the temperature of the moisture-filled air is reduced, which in turn lowers the amount of moisture it can contain. Boom again. Clouds or fog forms.

Clouds and fog are a great metaphor for the wilderness places in our lives . . .

The times we are tested and wings beat us and nip at our head.

The Scripture is comforting in that, God isn't saying if clouds are brought about, God is saying *when*.

When our hearts can't take it anymore.

When our souls get saturated.

When we are driven into the wilderness of our lives.

God — whom I know, I know, I often make out to be some Cosmic Love Bug — God actually understands the wild and terrifying side of life. Lest we forget God's very self, is wild and terrifying — read the Old or First Testament. Look around. God gets it.

And we need God to be wild and terrifying, need God to be made of the very stuff that can destroy us, so that *when* we find ourselves lost and tested in the wilderness and under the heaviest clouds we've ever known, and when we can't see a way out, God can and does for us.

But that doesn't mean the wild beasts won't nip at us and circle like vultures. It also doesn't mean some fluffy-winged angel will swoop in and save the day either.

The wilderness is a frightening place because we're not sure we will survive. And if we do survive, we're not sure we'll be able to live into the scars. Or bear the memory of the experience.

But then there's this weird thing called a covenant that God created and initiated. I've preached on covenants before.

Covenants from God have three parts:

I think the first part of a covenant is staggering. And whether you know it or not, the first part was laid at your feet the moment you drew breath in this life:

It's "an invitation to participate" and that can be scary as hell because that's when we accept that all the wild beasts might tear us up. In our lesson from Genesis, the participants were God and all flesh.

Now the second part of a covenant is a promise. The promise in our lesson is that God said He won't wipe everybody out through a flood ever again. Seems that tore God's heart up.

But, promises are a funny word for us. Promises don't seem to mean much to us anymore — they're fragile, they don't always hold or we

change our minds. They've become commodities and something to move around.

But from God's side? They mean everything because they are sacred and central to all that God says and does.

Through God, promises stay,

They hold and God is the constant in them.

Doesn't matter how thick and deep are the clouds or fog that comes our way.

Doesn't matter how heavy the rain or how wild the wilderness.

And finally, because God - being our Creator - knows us and knows we like reassurances, the third part of a covenant is a sign. In the flood story, the rainbow is a sign of God's promise.

Jesus understood that entering a covenant with God meant that he had faith that he would emerge from any clouds or fog — from great testing in the wilderness to resurrection from the cross.

In the wilderness story, Jesus accepts the first part of the covenant: The invitation to participate with a God who shows up as wild and terrifying.

The second part of the covenant — the promise — is that Jesus would not be alone. While he is relentlessly pursued by the Adversary, he is also attended to by angels *and* wild beasts.

And finally, the third part of the covenant — the sign — is that Jesus emerges triumphant from his testing in the wilderness. That didn't mean he wasn't bruised and battered. He was exhausted, depleted, starving and God only knows what else . . .

Beloveds,

Lent is a wasted hollow gesture when reduced to giving something up that you know you can return to. How does that move you closer to God?

My prayer is that this Lenten season, you will reflect on the 3 parts of God's covenant with the particulars of you and your life.

When did you last really participate in your life with God? When there were no pretenses and you felt the heaviness of the clouds and there was perhaps a wild and terrifying energy to it?

And in that place, as you look back did you sense or become aware of God's promise? If so, what did it look, sound or feel like?

And as you emerged from that place — or maybe you are still finding your way out — what sign did you see or understand that something of God's untamed self was there?

As we move through Lent, I pray you feel the nearness of God.
I pray you let yourself get pushed around by the wildness of God.
And I especially pray that you too are moved closer to God and all
manner of mysteries that surround that Sacred Naming.

Amen