

“Where the Wild Things Are”

August 16, 2009

Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24

Mark 1:12-13

There is no wilderness, no trial, no tribulation, no fear, deep and dark enough to exclude the presence of God.

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*“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.
And there he was tempted by Satan;
and he was with the wild beasts.”*

All three synoptic gospels tell the story of the baptism of Jesus and all three follow it with his being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke are expansive in their description of the event: Matthew using 11 verses and Luke 13 in describing Jesus’ confrontation with Satan. Mark uses just two. Matthew and Luke are wonderful storytellers turning the event into teaching moments for an early Christian faith that was set upon from all sides by those seeking to destroy it. *“Stand firm in midst of temptation,”* is the underlying message. *“Your Lord and Master did. You can too!”*

Matthew & Luke’s stories catch my attention ... Mark captures my imagination.

Matthew and Luke speak to the content of my faith. Mark speaks to my heart. His brief rendition of the temptation of Christ draws me into the story by allowing me to join Jesus in the wilderness. In doing so Mark gives me the opportunity to name the fears, the temptations ... the beasts that lie in wait for me.

This first act in the baptized Christ’s public ministry is a personal one. This One with whom God is pleased; this One whom the voice from heaven calls “My Son” now finds himself out Where The Wild Things Are!

Immediately upon assuming his identity in baptism Jesus is driven into the wilderness. Though for a far different reason the motif is clearly reminiscent of the biblical stories of Adam & Eve forced to create new identities after being cast out of Eden and away from God’s presence into the wilderness; and of Israel after being delivered from Pharaoh’s army, convincing themselves that God had led them out into the wilderness of Sinai to die. **In the worldview of the biblical writers being in the wilderness is being where God is not.**

Lamar Williamson, in his commentary on Mark, reminds the student of Scripture that the key to interpreting this experience in the life of Jesus is to understand that his baptism was his commissioning and the wilderness experience represents the conflict and the struggle that will come with Sonship. In responding to his call Jesus will be set upon by those who are unable and unwilling to recognize this new thing that God is doing in their world. This Messiah will threaten the status quo. . . . and the principalities and the powers will not stand idly by as God seeks to redeem and restore creation.

... and the Road leads through the wilderness
 ... where the Wild Things Are;
 Alone. Set upon by Satan,
 Afraid? Abandoned? Intimated?
 Maybe. Most likely.

Those same powers have raged against Christians in every age – and we are not immune.

Child of God what do your fears look like?
 Are there times when you find yourself
 Where the Wild Thing Are?
 Are they already gnawing at your bones?
 Anxiety? Insecurity? Fear?
 Does tomorrow scare you to death?
 Sometimes. Often.

The beauty of Mark's brief story is that he lets us fill in the gaps; he lets us writes the verse ourselves. He opens a door into the dichotomies of life: faith tested by fear; trust assaulted by temptation; hope under siege by despair. Mark is telling us that though confronted by all of these things, Jesus was not alone. And neither are we.

For he knew the song. He must have. Surely his mother sang it to him in his childhood. Surely he heard it sung a synagogue and Temple. Did the angels sing it with him? Our Lord knew the song – the Psalm that is the focus of our worship this day. Did he hum himself to sleep with its comforting words? Did he wrap it around himself just as he would have untied the cloak from around his waist covering his head and shoulders from the desert wind? Would he have found in each word and phrase comfort and security and peace from its cadence? Absolutely!!

“Where could I go, O God, to escape your Spirit?
 Where could I flee from your presence?”
 If I climb to the heavens, you are there;
 There too if I lie in death,

Thank you, God!!

If I flew to the point of sunrise,
 Or westward across the sea,
 your hand would still be guiding me,
 your right hand holding me fast.

If I asked darkness to cover me,
 and light to become night around me,
 that darkness would not be dark to your,
 night would be as light as day!

Thank you, God, thank you!!

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Her name is **Ann Weems**. We Presbyterians claim her and love her deeply devotional poetry and sensitive spirit. Her poems in [Kneeling in Jerusalem](#) and [Kneeling in Bethlehem](#) are found on many a pastor's bookshelf. In 1995, in the introduction of her newest offering, [Psalms of Lament](#), she wrote:

"On August 14, 1982, the stars fell from my sky. My son, my Todd, had been killed less than an hour after his twenty-first birthday. August 14, 1982 ... and I still weep."

Thirteen years after her son's death, the pain, the grief had not waned. If she were writing those words today ... I have no doubt tears would still fall. The fifty lament psalms she wrote in the wake of that personal tragedy are testimony to the darkness and loneliness that comes with faith's tragic loss of a child, or the death of a beloved spouse; the loss of meaningful work, or of a career ending mistake; or marital infidelity such as the one described by W.H. Auden, when ...

... Victor walked out into the High Street
 He walked to the edge of the town;
 He came to the allotments
 and the rubbish heap
 And his tears came tumbling down.
 Victor looked up at the sunset
 As he stood there all alone;
 Cried: "Are you in Heaven, Father?"
 But the sky said "Address not known."

"Victor, A Ballad"

In the midst of tragedy, God can seem so distant, so removed, so absent. We call upon our faith, and it comes up wanting. We convince ourselves that there is no "Balm in Gilead" to soothe the painful soul. There is no comfort in the night, only silence, and tears, and fears, and

now and again the clear voice of one no longer there. The night brings out the cry of absence and the fear of unknown tomorrows.

O God, have you forgotten my name?
Writes Ann Weems
 How long will you leave me in this pit?

These emotions are not unfamiliar one to any one of us. We may not be able to articulate our feelings as well as Weems can, or verbalize a personal crisis as well as Auden, but each one of us has or will run into some crisis – some Wild Thing -- that shatters all the talk of a good and loving “Father who art in heaven;” when as **Edmund Stiemle** says, “*there seems to be no ‘ground of existence anywhere’ so far as we can see ... when life seems quite literally to be no more than a ‘tale told by an idiot,’*” with us starring in the title role.

“*My, God, my God,*” cries the Psalmist, “*why have you forsaken me?*”
 Jesus knew that song, too. On Golgotha it is a plea for help!

It was noon darkness came over the whole land.
 At three Jesus cried out with a loud voice,
 “Elo-i, Elo-i lema sabach-thani?”
 (my God, my God why have you disappeared?)
Mark 15:33-34

Psalm 139 is the answer to that plaintive, painful, fully human cry. It is the fullest expression of the fact that there is not one place on earth, there is not one condition of life, there is not any darkness or solitude that can exclude the presence of God. Jesus not only weathered the temptation of Satan, and survived the wild beasts, he was attended by angels. Driven into the wilderness, but not abandoned. Tested, but not overwhelmed. The resurrection is the divine validation of God’s promise to never abandon.

Are you no less dear to the God who created and named you?

Paul Tillich once wrote, “*God is simply inescapable.*” *God is God only because God is inescapable. And only that which is inescapable is God.*”

Long before there were theologians like Tillich who spent their lives developing systematic theologies and honing the tenets of the Christian faith, Psalm 139 assured the faithful of God’s omniscience; of God omnipresence; of God sovereignty. Long before the creation of pastoral theologies the psalmist affirms that God knows me and that God is with me ... in every moment of my life; indeed even as I was being formed in my mother’s womb.

In phrase and meter so beautifully rendered, those in the midst of the wildernesses of life are assured that God is not absent. In fact we are so valued by God that God will not

allow us to get lost. In reflecting on her wilderness journey **Kathleen Norris**, in Amazing Grace, writes, “*God didn’t loose me, I was the one who “misplaced God.”*”

As well as Tillich & Norris render it, no one has surpassed the Apostle Paul who has blessed countless generations of Christians with the most comprehensive and well crafted commentary on Psalm 139, when he wrote to the Church in Rome,

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Can trouble, pain or persecution? Can lack of clothes and food, danger to
life and limb, the threat of armed force?*

*No, in all these things we win an overwhelming victory through him who has
proved his love for us.*

*For I am absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger
of heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what may happen today nor what
may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from
below, nor anything else in God’s whole world has any power to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!*

Romans 8

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Let us Pray ...

Lord, you examine me and you know me.
you know if I am standing or sitting,
you read my thoughts from far away.
whether I walk or lie down, you are watching,
you know ever detail of my conduct.

The word is not even on my tongue,
Lord, before you know all about it;
close behind and close in front you fence me round,
shielding me with your hand.

Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
a height to which my mind cannot attain.

Where could I go to escape your spirit?
Where could I flee from your presence?

Psalm 139:1-9

Nowhere! Not even where the Wild Things Are!

Amen and Amen!

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