

Mark 1: 9-15

TODAY IS THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT AND THE AIM OF LENT, OF COURSE, IS TO GET US APPROPRIATELY TO EASTER. EASTER TAKES PREPARATION. THE SIMPLE GLADNESS, THE ALMOST UNSPEAKABLE JOY OF EASTER, REQUIRES DISCIPLINED WORK, A LITTLE HONEST PONDERING OF THE HUMAN CONDITION. RESURRECTION DOESN'T HAPPEN IN A BUBBLE. IT COMES ONLY AFTER SUFFERING, CRUCIFIXION, DYING.

THIS MORNING WE AGAIN FOCUS ON MARK. MARK IS IN A HURRY FOR SOME REASON. THE BOOK HE WROTE IS MUCH SHORTER THAN THE OTHERS BY ABOUT HALF, WHICH IS THE REASON MARK IS A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN IF YOU HAVE NEVER READ THE BIBLE BEFORE. MARK IS IN A HURRY. HE USES THE WORD *IMMEDIATELY* A LOT. HE DOESN'T DAWDLE OR EDITORIALIZE MUCH. HE GETS RIGHT TO THE POINT. IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH, HE PACKS A LOT OF MATERIAL INTO A FEW SENTENCES. JESUS, MARK SAYS, WAS BAPTIZED BY JOHN. HE SAW THE HEAVENS RIPPED OPEN AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD DESCENDING, LIKE A DOVE. HE HEARD A VOICE SAY, "YOU ARE MY SON, THE BELOVED; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED." THEN THAT SAME SPIRIT DRIVES HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS, WHERE HE REMAINS FOR 40 DAYS, TEMPTED BY SATAN. THERE ARE WILD BEASTS OUT THERE IN THE WILDERNESS, AND THE ANGELS WAITED ON HIM.

NOTICE THAT THE SPIRIT THAT COMES TO HIM GENTLY, LIKE A DOVE, ALSO *DRIVES* HIM— DOESN'T INVITE HIM, DOESN'T GENTLY LEAD HIM---*DRIVES* HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS. MARK CHOOSES VERY STRONG LANGUAGE. THE SPIRIT LITERALLY "THROWS HIM OUT" INTO THE WILDERNESS. THAT IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE WAY WE MOSTLY THINK ABOUT THE SPIRIT OF GOD: GENTLE, CALMING, REASSURING, COMFORTING. SOMETIMES WE EVEN CALL THE SPIRIT THE COMFORTER. BUT HERE THE SPIRIT DISCOMFORTS, SHAKES THINGS UP, REARRANGES THE SPIRITUAL FURNITURE, SETS JESUS ON A NEW PATH, AND PUTS HIM DOWN IN THE WILDERNESS, AND THERE WERE ANGELS IN THAT WILDERNESS. ALONG WITH SATAN, THE WILD BEASTS AND EVERYTHING ELSE ONE FINDS IN THE DESERT—HEAT THAT BURNS YOUR SKIN, THIRST THAT MAKES YOUR TONGUE STICK TO THE ROOF OF YOUR MOUTH, PLANTS CROWNED WITH THORNS— THERE WERE ALSO ANGELS "WHO MINISTERED TO HIM."

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THOSE ANGELS AS WE HEAR AGAIN THIS WELL-KNOWN STORY ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT. THEY ARE EASY TO OVERLOOK. IN FACT, THEY USUALLY ARE. THE TWO COMMON THEMES THAT SURFACE MOST OFTEN ARE TEMPTATION AND REPENTANCE. GOOD THEMES BUT THE ANGELS NEVER MAKE THE CUT.

YET MARK REMEMBERED THEM. IN HIS LEAN, SPARCE GOSPEL—MARK INCLUDED THE ANGELS THAT JESUS MET ON HIS LONELY SOJOURN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE JORDAN. IN LUKE'S VERSION OF THE SAME STORY, LUKE LEAVES THEM OUT ENTIRELY. IN MATTHEW'S

GOSPEL, THE ANGELS ONLY SHOW UP AT THE END. BUT IN MARK, THEY'RE THERE THE WHOLE TIME, ALL FORTY DAYS.

IT'S NOT AS THOUGH MARK AS A THING FOR ANGELS. HE DOESN'T. OTHER THAN THIS STORY ABOUT JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS, ANGELS SELDOM SHOW UP IN MARK'S GOSPEL. WHEN THEY DO, THEY'RE SIMPLY PART OF GOD'S ROYAL COURT. THEY'RE NOT DOWN ON EARTH HELPING PEOPLE. UNLIKE LUKE'S GOSPEL, MARK RECORDS NO ENCOUNTER BETWEEN MARY AND THE ANGEL GABRIEL NOR ANY ANGELIC APPEARANCE TO SHEPHERDS. MARK LEAVES OUT MATTHEW'S ANGEL TELLING JOSEPH NOT TO BE AFRAID TO TAKE MARY AS HIS WIFE OR WHISPERING IN HIS EAR TO TAKE HIS FAMILY AND FLEE TO EGYPT. IN MARK, THERE'S NO ANGEL WHO STRENGTHENS JESUS IN GETHSEMANE, AND IT'S NOT CLEAR IF IT'S AN ANGEL THE WOMEN MEET AT THE EMPTY TOMB OR JUST A YOUNG MAN DRESSED IN WHITE.

SO WHEN MARK DOES INCLUDE ANGELS HELPING JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS, WE NEED TO SIT UP AND TAKE NOTE. TO DO SO DOESN'T DISREGARD THE TEMPTATIONS OR EVEN THE TEMPTER HIMSELF THAT JESUS CONFRONTED IN THOSE FORTY DAYS. NOR DOES IT NEGATE LENT'S CALL TO REPENTANCE, TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR OWN TEMPTATIONS AND TO WRESTLE WITH OUR OWN DEMONS.

CERTAINLY, WE NEED TO BE HONEST ABOUT THE TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS JESUS FACED IN THE WILDERNESS AND THAT WE FACE IN OUR OWN LIVES. WE ALSO NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE WILD BEASTS THAT SURROUNDED HIM IN THE DESERT, JUST AS WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE THINGS THAT SCARE AND WORRY US IN LIFE. LENT IS THE TIME TO DO THAT.

BUT IT'S ALSO TIME TO REMEMBER THE ANGELS, IN JESUS' WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE AND IN OURS. TO REMEMBER, AS MARK DOES, THAT THEY WERE THERE FOR JESUS FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF HIS 40-DAY JOURNEY, JUST AS GOD HAD BEEN WITH HIS ANCESTORS EVERY DAY OF THEIR 40-YEAR DESERT JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS. JUST AS GOD PROMISES TO BE WITH US IN THE WILD, LONELY, SCARY PLACES OF OUR LIVES.

LENT IS A TIME TO TAKE STOCK OF OUR LIVES, TO COME CLEAN ABOUT THE THINGS THAT TEMPT US AND THE THINGS THAT SCARE US. PART OF OUR LENTEN DISCIPLINE CAN BE TO ACKNOWLEDGE, IN THE WORDS OF THE PRAYER, "THE HARM WE HAVE DONE AND THE GOOD WE HAVE LEFT UNDONE" OR IN THE WORDS OF STEP 10 OF EVERY 12-STEP PROGRAM, "TO DO A FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY."

BUT I ALSO INVITE US TO ANOTHER LENTEN INVENTORY, AN ACCOUNTING OF THE ANGELS WE HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED AND WHO HAVE LOVED US, IN THE WILDERNESS TIMES OF

OUR LIVES. TO REMEMBER, AS MARK REMEMERED, THOSE ANGELS THAT SHOW UP WHEN WE'RE TIRED, THIRSTY, AND SURROUNDED BY WILD BEASTS—JUST AS THEY DID FOR JESUS.

OUR WILDERNESS ANGELS PROBABLY DON'T LOOK LIKE WE THINK ANGELS SHOULD. NO MIDDLE-SCHOOL TEACHER WHO BELIEVED IN US WHEN WE COULDN'T BELIEVE IN OURSELVES. OR THE COACH WHO GAVE US A CHANCE TO PLAY, EVEN IF WE WEREN'T VERY GOOD. MAYBE YOUR ANGEL IS A COLLEAGUE WHO HAD YOUR BACK DURING A ROUGH TIME AT WORK OR A FRIEND WHO LISTENED TO YOUR FEARS AND GRIEF DURING A LOSS. SOMETIMES OUR WILDERNESS ANGELS ARE THE PEOPLE WHO ACCEPT OUR APOLOGIES WHEN WE'VE HURT THEM OR OTHERS, THE PEOPLE WHO REMIND US THROUGH THAT ACCEPTANCE THAT, IN THE WORDS OF WILLIAM SLOAN COFFIN, THERE "IS MORE GRACE IN GOD THAN SIN IN US." SOMETIMES OUR ANGELS ARE STRANGERS WHO MINISTER TO US WITH A SMILE OR ASSURING WORD.

OTHER TIMES THE ANGELS ARE SIMPLY THE PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO WALK WITH US INTO THE WILDERNESS AND DESERTS OF OUR OWN LIVES. A GENTLEMAN NAMED BILL SHARES THE FOLLOWING STORY: I WAS THE YOUNGEST OF THREE CHILDREN, AND IN THE 6TH GRADE IN 1964 WHEN MY FATHER BEGAN TO MANIFEST SIGNS OF WHAT TURNED OUT TO BE A SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS. THE DAY BEFORE MY 13TH BIRTHDAY, MY FATHER WAS COMMITTED TO THE STATE HOSPITAL. GIVEN THE STIGMA THAT SURROUNDED MENTAL ILLNESS, NEITHER MY MOTHER NOR MY GRANDPARENTS WANTED ANYONE TO KNOW WHAT HAD HAPPENED. OUR FAMILY STORY WAS SIMPLY THAT DAD WAS AWAY ON BUSINESS.

THE SILENCE AROUND MY FATHER'S ILLNESS AND HOSPITALIZATION ONLY INCREASED MY FEARS. IN ADDITION, BECAUSE JOKES ABOUT THE MENTALLY ILL AND PLACES LIKE THE STATE HOSPITAL ABOUNDED AT THAT TIME, MY FRIENDS OFTEN MADE JOKES ABOUT THE "LOONEY BIN". I WOULD JOIN IN THE LAUGHTER. WHAT ELSE COULD I DO? NONE OF MY TEACHERS, NOT EVEN OUR PASTOR KNEW OF MY FATHER'S SITUATION.

THE ONE EXECEPTION WAS MR. MOORE, MY 4-H LEADER AND TRUSTED FAMILY FRIEND. I NEVER TALKED DIRECTLY WITH HIM DIRECTLY ABOUT MY DAD, BUT I KNEW THAT MR. MOORE SOMEHOW KNEW WHAT HAD HAPPENED. THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE.

THE WEEK BEFORE MY DAD'S BIRTHDAY, MY MOTHER TOLD ME SHE WANTED ME AND MY SISTERS TO GO WITH HER TO THE STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE DAY. I WAS TERRIFIED. I HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO EXPECT FROM EITHER MY FATHER OR THE OTHER PATIENTS. ALL I KNEW WERE ALL THE STORIES I'D HEARD ABOUT "MANIACS" AND OTHER "CRAZY" PEOPLE. IT WAS THE 1960'S, AFTER ALL. I DREADED WALKING THROUGH THE HOSPITAL GATES WITH MY MOTHER AND SISTERS. HOW COULD I PROTECT THEM FROM WHAT I IMAGINED I WOULD FIND? SO I TOLD MY MOTHER I DIDN'T WANT TO GO, HAD OTHER THINGS TO DO, AND

DIDN'T WANT TO SEE MY FATHER THERE. I WAS ASHAMED—ASHAMED OF MY FATHER, ASHAMED OF MYSELF.

BUT MY MOTHER INSISTED I GO. I DUG IN MY HEELS. SO DID MY MOTHER. BUT THEN A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE VISIT, MY MOTHER ASKED IF IT WOULD HELP TO HAVE SOMEONE ELSE COME ALONG. I IMMEDIATELY THOUGHT OF MR. MOORE, WHO AGREED TO GO. IT WAS LIKE A GIFT FROM GOD. GOING THROUGH THE HOSPITAL GATES, SEEING MY FATHER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS—ALL OF IT WAS STILL SCARY. BUT HAVING MR. MOORE ALONG MADE A DIFFERENCE. HE KNEW WHAT TO SAY AND DO. HE SIMPLY GAVE MY DAD A BIG HUG AND TEASED HIM ABOUT GETTING OLD. HE SHARED STORIES ABOUT ALL THE FUN THINGS HE AND MY DAD HAD DONE TOGETHER. HE GOT HIM TO ASK ME AND MY SISTERS ABOUT OUR 4-H PROJECTS AND SCHOOL.

WE STAYED UNTIL VISITING HOURS WERE OVER. IT WAS ACTUALLY HARD TO LEAVE, WHICH SURPRISED ME SINCE I'D DREADED IT SO MUCH. BUT AS WE WALKED OUT, I REALIZED MY FEAR WAS GONE. HAVING MR. MOORE THERE MADE IT OK, LIKE WE WERE ALL AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE AT HOME AND NOT IN A VISITOR'S ROOM AT THE STATE HOSPITAL. HE MADE US FEEL OK TOO. MY DAD WAS STILL MY DAD, EVEN IF HE WAS STRUGGLING WITH AN ILLNESS.

MR. MOORE WASN'T ANYONE SPECIAL. HE WASN'T TRAINED IN PSYCHIATRY OR PASTORAL COUNSELING. HE WAS JUST A FRIEND WHO WAS WILLING TO WALK THROUGH THOSE HOSPITAL GATES WITH US AND SIT AND EAT BIRTHDAY CAKE AND TALK WITH MY DAD.

LENT BEGINS WITH JESUS' 40-DAY JOURNEY INTO THE WILDERNESS, WHERE ACCORDING TO MARK, HE WAS "TEMPTED BY SATAN AND WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS." OUR LENTEN JOURNEY ALSO LEADS US INTO SUCH WILDERNESS TIMES AND PLACES, BE THEY IN OUR OWN LIVES OR IN THE WORLD AROUND US. IT CAN BE A HARD JOURNEY FILLED WITH FEARSOME THINGS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH ARE OUR OWN SINS AND FAILINGS AND THE TIMES WE'VE LET THOSE FEARSOME THINGS GET THE BEST OF US. IN OUR OWN DESERTS OF LENT, WE CAN FEEL OVERWHELMED BY THE WILD BEASTS OF DEPAIR OR REGRET.

BUT EVEN IN SUCH A TIME, DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE ANGELS IN THE WILDERNESS. MARK DIDN'T AND NEITHER SHOULD WE.

THE SONG ANGELS AMONG US BY ALABAMA LIVED WITHIN ME AS I WROTE THIS SERMON. ALLOW ME TO CLOSE WITH JUST A FEW OF THE LYRICS: "WHEN LIFE HELD TROUBLED TIMES AND HAD ME DOWN ON MY KNEES, THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN SOMEONE TO COME ALONG AND COMFORT ME...A KIND WORD FROM A STRANGER TO LEND A HELPING HAND; A PHONE CALL FROM A FRIEND JUST TO SAY I UNDERSTAND. BUT AIN'T IT KIND OF FUNNY AT THE DARK END OF THE ROAD THAT SOMEONE LIGHTS THE WAY WITH JUST A SINGLE RAY OF HOPE.

THEY WEAR SO MANY FACES, SHOW UP IN THE STRANGEST PLACES TO GRACE US WITH GOD'S MERCY IN OUR TIME OF NEED. OH I BELIEVE THERE ARE ANGELS AMONG US, SENT DOWN TO US FROM SOMEWHERE UP ABOVE. THEY COME TO YOU AND ME IN OUR DARKEST HOURS TO SHOW US HOW TO LIVE, TO TEACH US HOW TO GIVE, TO GUIDE US WITH THE LIGHT OF LOVE.

