

“Living in God’s Care”
February 21, 2021

Deuteronomy 32:8-14
Mark 1: 12-13

As we start this season of Lent, let us keep in the front of our minds that Lent is not an end in itself. While we may give more focused attention to worship, prayer, study, or service in these days, the purpose of all of this is that we might better celebrate the joy of Easter and better know the power of resurrection in our lives.

This year we are especially aware of the challenges that are with us and ahead of us and of the changes that will be as startling and disorienting as resurrection.

When we gathered last Wednesday for the Service for the Beginning of Lent, I invited those present, as I invite you, now, to think back over the past year and consider: what have you been carrying that you needed at the moment to survive but that now has turned your heart to stone, or left you frozen, indifferent, or paralyzed. What are you holding onto that makes you unable to receive what will protect and help you in different ways through the changing days and months ahead. Perhaps it is anger or fear or frenzy or impatience to have everything in order or indifference or despair.

As you consider such things, do so with mercy rather than accusation. Look with compassion upon yourself. Any or all of these things might have been helpful at some point. They might have been how you got through the day or the summer or this winter. But now it might be time to let them go, to modify or reframe them.

In these days as we prepare for Easter, we are invited to let go of all that is weighing us down so that with open hands and open hearts we can receive the gifts of God that we need now so that we might move forward.

This Lent, then, let us ask what it is that we need to receive, what we need to take up so that our Easter celebrations will be more real, more joyful, more empowering. I have a few ideas—and I would welcome hearing what you want to be open to in the coming weeks.

To start, let us recognize that we have been worried and wary, so *care*-full for so long now. We wear masks and keep our distance. We know the pain that comes as we are separated from family and friends. And let me be clear: we need to continue in these careful ways for some time to come.

So we also need to open ourselves to something like the *providence* of God, the faithful sense that even in times of trial and trouble we are loved and valued by God, the faithful sense that God does indeed care for us.

The great mid-twentieth century theologian, Paul Tillich, sought to understand providence in his time as we do in ours. His clarity is much like our own when he says that providence “is certainly not a vague promise that, with the help of God, everything

will come to a good end; there are many things that come to a bad end. And it is not the maintenance of hope in every situation; there are situations in which there can be no hope.”

We know this. So we turn to that brief lesson from the Gospel of Mark and listen in wonder: “Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

The genius of the Gospel of Mark is in its brevity. The entire disturbing story of Jesus in the wilderness is told in one troubling sentence and much is left to our imagination.

José Pagola says: “The brief account finishes with two strongly contrasting images: Jesus ‘was among wild animals,’ but ‘angels attended to him.’ The wild animals, the most dangerous in all creation, evoke the dangers that will always threaten Jesus and his plan. Angels, the best beings in creation, evoke the nearness of God who blesses, takes care of, and protects Jesus and his mission.”

That last phrase—the angels waited on him—is key here. It speaks of the care of God in the wilderness of our lives. But let us approach it slowly.

The wilderness is a place of trial. The wilderness is the place where the heavens seem closed.

When we face difficult choices with no good options, we are staring at the desert places of life.

Those times when we pray and find no answer are times in the wilderness. Those times when we are numbed by tragedies great and small are times in the wilderness.

Those times when we doubt the providence of God are times in the wilderness.

Such times do not have a set limit at which they are simply over and done. The ancient Hebrew people used the number forty to express a long, indeterminate time—forty days in the wilderness, forty years of Exodus wandering in the desert. It wasn’t meant to be literal. It was time that went on for as long as it took.

You know this. Our times in the wilderness do not have easily determined boundaries.

The wilderness is a place where we become something new. In the wilderness, among wild beasts and angels Jesus is tested. He begins to discover who he is and what his life will be about.

If we did not know it before, we have learned this “forty day” pandemic that to be alive is to face times of trial. We often see the negative side of this. But these are events that help us to grow up. They are the experiences that offer us a deeper maturity—regardless of our age. Through times of trial we give shape to people we are.

And so I agree with Francis DeBernardo when he says that “the desert can be a place not just of isolation, suffering, and temptation, but a place where God speaks to us most intimately. It’s a place where we can find our deepest, truest selves. A place where we can experience God’s care even though we may feel that we are being attacked.”¹

Perhaps you can recall your own times of trial, times when you emerged to find yourself stronger. If so, you can be thankful.

But we must never be glib about the wilderness. We must never be glib in asserting the possibility for growth in such places. For we know those who have faced times of trial and who did not make it through, those who could not stand in the time of trial. We know those who have wrestled through the night and did not win the battle. We know those who have struggled with demons alone in the wilderness did not prevail.

And yet we hear “the angels waited on Jesus” and those words still draw us toward the possibility of providence.

Tillich helps again when he tells us that “the content of the faith in Providence is this:...when cruelty wields power over nations and individuals as it does now, when hunger and persecution drive millions from place to place as they do now, and when prisons and slums all over the world distort the humanity of the bodies and souls of human beings as they do now, we can [say] in that time, and just in that time, that even all of this cannot separate us from the love of God. In this sense, and in this sense alone, all things work together for good, for the ultimate good, the eternal love, and the Realm of God. Faith in divine Providence is the faith that nothing can prevent us from fulfilling the ultimate meaning of our existence.”

And he cautions us that “It is not the depth of our suffering, but the depth of our separation from God, which destroys our faith in Providence.”

In these days, we can let go of the worried care that separates us from God so that with forgiveness we might once again—even in times of trial—know the deep and abiding care of God.

There are people out in the wilderness even now. And they need something—something like what those of us who follow the broken and resurrected Christ might be able to offer. If, by the power of the risen Christ, we would go into these wild places, perhaps we ourselves might become the angels—the very messengers of the God of mercy and compassion—who are so desperately needed among the wild beasts.

Our final hymn this morning is the African American spiritual “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.” It sings of that deep human desire for companionship in the wilderness, for the care of God even as we ourselves are careful.

This then, is the good news. We are never alone when we face times of trial. We are never alone when we face temptation, when we feel tested. In Jesus Christ, God knows the testing we encounter, has already walked where we walk, and is with us even now.

In our wilderness trials, the compassionate providence of God will be made known to us.

¹ <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2015/02/22/rainbows-deserts-wild-beasts-and-angels/>