

Sermon: February 18, 2024, the First Sunday in Lent: Mark 1: 9-15
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley



On the cover of today's bulletin, is an emblem that will become familiar over the next few weeks. Two years ago, the United Church of Canada adopted a new call and vision statement, and the call is threefold: Deep Spirituality - Bold Discipleship – Daring Justice. Throughout Lent, this calling will help shape our time of Worship, and this morning is the first of two Sundays built around the theme, "Deep Spirituality".

On this first Sunday in Lent, that exploration of deep spirituality begins with the story of Jesus' spiritual preparation in the wilderness. Most Bible commentators, dealing with the more detailed versions of this story in Matthew or Luke, focus mostly on the three-fold temptations placed in front of Jesus by Satan, and the scripture-based ways Jesus resisted those.

But there's an oft-overlooked line in both Matthew and Mark that wouldn't let me go: "and angels attended him." The Oxford dictionary states that an angel is "a spirit who is believed to be a servant of God, and is sent by God to deliver a message or perform a task." Perhaps no theological concept is more beloved, or more dismissed. There are people with no religious leanings whatsoever for whom the concept of a guardian angel is extremely meaningful; and there are devoutly religious people for whom Angels are pure fiction. Then there's the whole schema of fallen angels, which is well outside of my scope today. Over my years in Ministry, whenever people talk about angels, I just kind of listen, for however it functions for you is good by me, so long as it fits into an overall belief system that is healthy & life-giving.

As I looked for writers who could guide me through this first chapter of Mark, I found Rev Talitha Arnold, a long-time United Church of Christ Pastor in Santa Fe, NM, and I will be quoting freely from her article "Angels in the Wilderness," for she puts into words the stirrings of my spirit.

She writes, "There were angels in the 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 [Jesus].'"

"In his lean, spare Gospel--the shortest one of all--Mark included the angels that Jesus met in his lonely sojourn.... In Luke's version of the same story, [angels are left 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 if Mark has a thing for angels. He doesn't. Other than this story about Jesus in the wilderness, angels seldom show up in Mark's Gospel.... So, when Mark does include angels helping Jesus in the wilderness, we need to sit up and take note.

She continues, "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 that desert, just as we need to acknowledge the things that [frighten us to the core]. Lent is a time to do that. But it's also a time to remember the angels, in his wilderness experience and in ours. To remember, as Mark does, that they were there for him 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 places of our lives."

Over my years with you, I've been open about the wilderness times of my life's story. I believe it's important for a community of faith to have spiritual honesty and emotional safety as a baseline, to provide a safe place where we can speak of our struggles and find support. And as much as the Biblical account of angels speak of supernatural beings sent specifically by God, my understandings of how God works through the Spirit also has room for us to be angels of deliverance to one another. Countless times in our lives, we feel inspired to reach out to someone in love. Sometimes we know they've been going through a rough patch, sometimes we have no idea of that... but they have been troubled, and our kindness, support and presence has been nothing short of holy. And other times we've been on the receiving end of such heavenly messengers and in those angelic encounters we experience the reality of God's love.

Sometimes, our wilderness times are times of grief, or medical crises, or times of life transition. Other times they are related to mental health, and we need to be open to those, too. To honour that, I share this story with you which I've spoken of before, but not for a while: twenty five years ago, serving a young, growing congregation in north Calgary, clinical depression overwhelmed me and I needed to re-learn how to live if I was going to survive my 40s. One might think that, living in a city of well over a million, my medical needs at that critical moment would be well-served, but technical expertise wasn't what I needed. I needed someone who knew and remembered what a healthy me looked like. And so I drove 140 km northeast of Calgary, to the town of Trochu where we'd lived previously, and went to see a doctor I had known through a sport we had both coached, him much more adeptly than me. I also knew he was involved in his Church, though I admit I didn't remember that detail until I was on the road.

As I described to him what was going on for me, why I had crashed spiritually and emotionally, he started accurately finishing my sentences. Eventually I looked at him and said, "have you been secretly riding around with me, or what?" And he just smiled shyly and said, "my father was a pastor – I know how this goes." I left his office with a prescription for an antidepressant, a second prescription that said, "read the book *Boundaries* by Cloud and Townsend and then see me in ten days", and a sense that I had been ministered to by one of God's holy angels. The process started that day saved me. So when I read of the angels present to Jesus throughout and beyond his wilderness time, it's not just theoretical to me. It's the God-honest truth, experienced in my own life.

For the next four minutes, then, let's try something we've not attempted since before the pandemic: a neighbour-nudge. I'd like you to turn to the person next to you, and share a time when you were ministered to by one of God's angels. Be as specific or as general as you like, just make sure it's not revealing something confidential about someone else unless you have their permission to do so, AND... I know that not everyone will be comfortable doing this, so just signal to those around you that you'd rather not participate if your alarm bells are going off with this task, no reasons required. I'll watch the time, I'll let you know when you've hit the 2 minute mark and the second person should start talking, and I'll let you know when there's only 30 seconds left. So... let's talk about our angels.

Returning to the words of Rev. Talitha Arnold, "Lent can be a time to take stock of our lives, to come clean about the things that tempt us and the things that scare us.... [and] to do an accounting of the angels we have known and loved and who have loved us, in the wilderness times of our own lives. To remember, as Mark remembered, those angels that show up when we're tired, thirsty and surrounded by wild beasts--just as they did for Jesus.

“Our wilderness angels”, she writes, “probably don't look like we think angels should. No long white robes, no rustling wings. Instead they may resemble the 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 one of your angels is a colleague who had your back during a rough time at work or a friend who listened to your fears and grief after a relationship ended. Sometimes our wilderness angels are the people who accept our apologies when we've hurt them or others.... And sometimes our angels are simply the people who are willing to walk with us into the wilderness and deserts of our own lives.

“Lent begins with Jesus' 40-day journey into the wilderness, [and] our Lenten journey also leads us into such wilderness times and places, be they in our own lives or in the world around us. Yes, it can be a hard journey filled with fearsome things, not the least of which are our own failings and the times we've let those fearsome things get the best of us. In our own deserts of Lent, we can feel beset by the wild beasts of despair or regret.

“But even in such a time”, concludes Talitha, “don't forget about the angels in the wilderness. Even in the wilderness, according to Mark's gospel, the angels got the last word. May that be true for us in our wilderness journey this Lent, too. Thanks be to God. Amen”.

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