

When I read ahead into the readings for today, my mind immediately wandered to a modern parable of grace, a story long forgotten to me, and I felt compelled to reacquaint myself with it.

Maybe you know it...

“The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind, and another, his mother called him ‘wild thing’ and Max said, ‘I’ll eat you up!’ so he was sent to bed without eating anything. That very night in Max’s room a forest grew, and grew, and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around, and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out for weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are. And when he came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said ‘Be Still!’ and tamed them with a magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things. ‘And now,’ cried Max, ‘let the wild rumpus start!’”¹

After Jesus is baptized, he is led by the Spirit out into the desert. He was there forty days and Satan tempted him – and Mark is the only one who tells us this - wild animals were there also, but the angels came and helped him. In sparse prose, Mark leaves out all the

¹ Sendak, Maurice. Where The Wild Things Are. Harper and Row, 1963

details we encounter in Luke and Matthew. His favorite word is εὐθυσ - at once, immediately...at once the Spirit led him out to the wilderness.

Mark loses no time. Still dripping from his baptism, Jesus encounters his temptations. Not given any quarter, he is thrust from anointing as God's chosen, God's beloved, into a terrible test of identity to see, if in the words of one pastor, his baptism has taken. Of course, much has been made through the years of Jesus' baptismal identity. How much did he know? When did he know his messianic identity? These are questions about which Mark seems singularly unconcerned. Mark, you see, is more concerned with the matter of that dove alighting on him. Mark is more concerned with the possibility that in Jesus' baptism, God has begun something new.

You see, Mark doesn't begin with the niceties of a birth narrative. There is no adolescence in Mark's telling of the story. He wants us to move immediately to that which concerns us: the forty days and forty nights of Jesus' *testing, temptation, tempering*, to see if God really can do something new in the world.

New Testament Scholar Eduard Schweizer writes,

“Is it true that Jesus has come as the new Adam who has counteracted the fall? Is it true that Jesus has come as the one promised in the Old Testament, the one through whom heaven and earth are reconciled once more? Stated concisely, is it true that God has acted in Jesus?”²

Mark is asking, “Can God really do something new in the world?” It is a relevant question to all of us who must live in a world wondering if the wild things rule. Casting aside the footy pajamas of the wolf suit, Sendak's children's story rings true to us all

² Schweizer, Eduard. Mark. JKP: Atlanta, p43

because there lives in each of us at some level a fear that the wild things will prevail and that we will not rule them. Sendak's story is a parable because it contains within it an element of truth, a kerygma, that perhaps we cannot control the wild things after all. Jesus tells us that we must encounter the kingdom like little children. Children know things about truth that adults have forgotten. They know that the world is a scary wondrous, miraculous place, all at once larger than we can control and yet we must live in it, that while it is too large with doorknobs too high to reach and cars looming around every street corner so that you must look both ways, and dogs that might bite but might also be nice to pet – they know that maybe you will tame the wild things with a magic trick and maybe you won't.

It is a parable because it points to that which we know, that lingers in all our bellies as a gut fear...maybe this world is bigger than we are.

“At once the Spirit made him go out into the desert. He was there forty days and Satan tempted him. Wild animals were there also, but angels came and helped him.”

When I was a chaplain intern sixteen years ago, after a day or two of letting me answer phones in the office, the chaplains did something positively dastardly. They gave me a stack of cards that had patients' names on them and room numbers and a religious affiliation. They were the folks who had indicated some faith tradition but no church home when they were admitted. I was to go Cold Calling. That meant I was to go into their rooms, identify myself, listen to whatever concerns they wanted to share, counsel them – that was a farce, I was a student after all – then pray with them...not much better. It only took a few days before I realized a few things about this process. First, I didn't like it. I can talk a good game, but I'm somewhat introverted by nature, so it was hard

work. Second, most of the people didn't want to see me. Third, that no one ever went into the cancer center chapel and that I could hide there without any fear of interruption.

Maybe this world is bigger than we are...

Of course, I didn't hide in the chapel long. I had a beeper. Do you remember beepers?

It would go off, bringing me back to the main wards where someone did want someone to talk to, someone to listen without blinking. Immediately I had to return.

Even in our secret hidden places, there are calls that pull us back where we need to be...

"Now Stop!" Max said and sent the wild things off to bed without their supper. And Max, the king of the all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all..."

We cannot stay long in the wilderness. Our spirits will not tolerate it. There is something within us that rebels against the distance from human interaction, the need to be present, the need to be loved.

We cannot stay long in the wilderness, but what about when the wilderness finds us?

What about when comes to meet us and brings its fearsome darkness to envelope us? In the wanderings of my mind, when I consider Jesus in the wilderness, it is a desolate place, filled with wild things. It is a place one might imagine in a Kazantzakis film...dark, rocky, clouds skitting across a blackened night sky, with ravens circling such that would make Poe proud. The wilderness as it might really be, as it might really appear is not a child's story but a very adult wilderness... fearful, untamable, unconquerable.

Where the Wild Things Are...a parable because it rings true. The ring of truth comes in myriad ways: a diagnosis... an infidelity discovered... addiction pounding in the temples,

twitching in the limbs, nightmares looming... the casket closing closing for the last time. Where the Wild Things are becomes not the stuff of children's bedtime but instead adult's nighttime...haunting, pursuing with ragged breath, chasing us into our fears, not filled with Sendak's lovable Jewish aunts, but instead with the demons of our own imagination. There are a thousand images of revivalist preaching that can bear down on our psyches.

No Jesus' leading into the wilderness was not the stuff of children's parables and illustrations. Nor is ours.

For some of you, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness would appear to be nothing but a warm up. Child's play, come back when he has faced something real, like years of illness, decline and degradation. Come back Jesus, when you have really been tested! Of course, Jesus didn't enter his test unmarked either. Mark's "immediately," or "at once," comes on the tail of his baptism - his identity formation - his claiming who he was, whose he was, why he was. Mark wants us by his "immediately" to know that we are looking at two parts of the same story. Jesus was baptized and he was tempted. They come together. They cannot be separated. God tore up the heavens and let a dove fall in...God slashed the sky and the spirit alights. The voice speaks. Then Spirit, the same spirit, leads Jesus out into the desert.

The same spirit leads Jesus from celebration to temptation? Shouldn't the Spirit, the holy Ruach of God want to preserve us from all evil? Shouldn't the Holy Ghost stand between us and the tempter?

Ah...but perhaps it is a parable because it rings true. Perhaps it is a parable because there is a kernel about it that won't let it go away.

Forty days. Covenant language, that. We pan back across our memories and we know that forty days... we remember those forty years... perhaps there is something more of this truth. Perhaps God is doing something more than meets the eye. Perhaps behind that sky and dove and water and all those crushing people, God has more in mind.

Eduard Schweizer continues:

“Is it true that God has acted in Jesus? Faith alone can answer just as Mark and the church before him attempt to do when they proclaim: in Jesus heaven again has opened, God has intervened, and since that time the Spirit of God is at work once more.

Consequently, both the battle with Satan and the peace of God have begun on earth. He who approaches Jesus therefore, approaches the open heaven as well as the wilderness where the command of the Spirit leads him into battle and temptation; and he meets not only the attack of Satan but the peace of God in the midst of the wild animals.”

Behind all the water and words lies God’s truth, that endures still, that God will hang a bow in the sky to remind us of the covenant relationship which we enter...that the waters will not destroy us, but cleanse us and sanctify us.

Or rather, that in cleansing and sanctifying us the waters will destroy us, but then renew us, drawing us up out of depths...perhaps God *is* up to something more. Perhaps it rings so true because we know the waters that crash and foam also splash and cleanse and they all declare that there is more mercy in God than sin in us.

Of course, students of Sendak know how the story ends...they know,

“Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are. But the wild things cried, ‘oh please don’t go, we’ll eat you up – we love you so!’ And Max said, ‘No!’ The wild things roared their

terrible roars, and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws, but Max stepped into his private boat and waved goodbye and sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him. And it was still hot.”

It is a parable of grace because it rings so true...it is a parable of grace because somehow we know that in that moment in the wilderness, surrounded by the wild things, when we wonder if we simply cannot endure, that we may return home and it is the smell of a heavenly meal that lures us...

But, friends, the Spirit of God will not break in upon us when bidden. My friend Brian Blount, writes, “this is a wild, untamed God who breaks in on Israel the way a tiger in the zoo would, if he could, crash open his cage door, just as you were walking by it. Clouds tearing, heavens ripping, divine voice booming, Spirit descending. This is terrible, untamed, tiger talk. It is the language of slashing and slicing shredding and clawing until something once locked up on that safe and seldom seen heavenly side over there knives its way free to this historical human side we’re standing on over here. Heaven, the sky, is a firmament in the Bible. It’s a buffer zone. You know what a buffer zone is. It’s a place that one great power uses to separate itself from another great power. It’s like the cage in which we keep tigers locked away in a zoo. That way we can still see them, but we don’t have to fear them, because the bars are a buffer between them and us. Well, for human beings, the heavens are like that. The ancient Hebrews believed that no human could look upon God and live. God was too holy, too bright, too powerful. Thank heavens, then for the heavens. It was the heavens that kept us separate from God, kept us

from seeing God face to face. It kept us from being blinded and destroyed by God's holiness."³

But God slashes open the heavens.

Where The Wild Things Are isn't there. Its here!

Imagine that we heard the calling over the oceans and across the days and years and into next week. Imagine we smelled the meal and stepped onto our private boats and set sail for home, our true home, where in the parable of grace, the meal is waiting...

Imagine if we did.

Because Where The Wild Things Are is here. Because God has called us to live untamed in this world. And God has given us the promise of grace in so doing. And yes, there is more mercy in God than sin in us.

So, let's come home to dinner. Let's all come home knowing that the place has been set, for all of us by a loving hand, let's know that we are welcome – untamed - as we are - to come to Christ's table.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

³ Blount, Brian and Gary Charles. Preaching Mark in Two Voices. p29