

## Sermon: Jesus and the Beasts

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, February 18, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I still remember vividly the time when I took my family to Parc Safari, the one south of Montreal, near the U.S. border. Justin and Neo were still quite young back then; it was supposed to be a pleasant family road trip to see some animals in a zoo, I had thought. I was not prepared for what we encountered, more specifically how close those animals came beside us. It was not a regular zoo where animals are locked inside cages, or safely behind fences. In Parc Safari, people drive their cars through designated routes, where the animals are let loose to roam. Essentially, people are the ones caged in while animals are in the wild. All kinds of animals — zebras, deers, camels, ostriches, elephants, and even lions. Most ignored us, but some did come close enough to the car, checking us out, all huddled together, inside the safe confine of our steel and glass cage.

What really struck me, when one sees those wild animals up close, is the enormity of their size. Those animals are big, they are beastly! In comparison, we human beings are nothing to them. That contrast in scale is especially true when one gets closer to a giraffe; not only the size but the height. Oh, the height of a giraffe is simply awe inspiring. One thing I learn that day in Parc Safari, as much as I like to see myself as an outdoorsy type, I probably would not last too long had I really gone into the wild, had I gone face to face with wild beasts.

It would appear Jesus did just that, going face to face with wild beasts. The specific passage I am referring to is Mark 1:13, "*He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.*" The author of this particular Gospel has a distinctive writing style of using words sparsely and concisely. Mark strings together three important components of the early ministry of Jesus, by giving them two verses each—namely the baptism of Jesus, the testing in the wilderness, and the initial proclamation of the coming Kingdom.

But don't let this brevity fool you, for Mark packs a punch with powerful verbs. Take for example his description of the baptism of Jesus, Mark tells us that Jesus "saw the heavens *torn* apart". This choice of word,

not found in Matthew or Luke, deliberately evokes Isaiah 64:1, “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.*” The word ‘tear’ suggests an almost violent in-breaking of God into the affairs of humanity. It is unexpected, sudden and world altering. With one word, Mark links the baptism of Christ with the hope expressed in Isaiah, the hope of the coming Messiah.

After the brief baptismal scene, Mark uses another powerful word: ‘drove’. That is the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. It is once again different than the other Gospel writers, where Luke says Jesus was ‘filled’ by the Spirit, and Matthew describes that the Spirit ‘led’ him. But Mark uses ‘drove’. It is an intriguing choice of word. Is Mark suggesting that Jesus was somewhat unwilling? Perhaps Jesus had wanted a different beginning to his ministry; perhaps a different process of initiation than forty days in the wilderness. We may never know.

What we do know is that after being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, Jesus was tested by Satan. The full version of that story can be found in Luke 4 or Matthew 4. After the testing, Jesus was eventually waited upon by the angels, the same is also described in Matthew. The verb used here in Greek is *diaconos*, to attend, to wait upon, or to minister. This word would eventually result in the position of a deacon as practiced in the early church.

However, what really captures my attention, is this middle part that is uniquely Mark, that “he was with the wild beasts”. What about the wild beasts? Mark doesn’t say. Were they friends or foes to Jesus? We don’t know. Were they carnivores or herbivores? Or let me rephrase that, were the wild beasts predators or preys? Unclear.

How big were these beast? Were they like the Behemoth, the mythical beast from the book of Job, created by God at the beginning of creation, and can only be tamed by the divine? Or were they man size, much easier to handle even by a former carpenter turned preacher? Your guess is as good as mine.

Was Jesus scared of them, did he run away? Or maybe he threw rocks at them, fought them off with his bare hands? Perhaps Jesus was he some kind of animal whisperer who could tame even the most ferocious beast, with only a few words or a stare? We simply do not know. All we know was the during that 40 days of wilderness, Jesus was with wild beasts, and he survived the ordeal.

Yes I know, my imagination is running wild, and I am sending all of us down a wild goose chase, with no apparent answer to any of these questions I posed. But I know Mark the gospel writer does not write words without a purpose. I think Mark is trying to convey a sense of wildness to the ministry of Jesus, to the core of his being, just like there was a certain wildness his cousin, John the baptizer.

John was described in an earlier verse as “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locust and wild honey.” Jesus was with wild beast. This sheer wildness represents courage, tenacity and strength. It is thinking outside the box, in fact, it breaks the box in order to make a bigger and better one. It is untameable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable.

John’s ministry was loathed and feared by the religious authority—he called them, the Pharisees, a brood of vipers. So was the ministry of Jesus loathed and feared by both the Jewish and the Roman authority. Just as John’s ministry would be seemingly put to an end by his head on a platter, up rises Jesus who had already endured the relentless assault by Satan in diverting, distracting and seducing him away from his core mission.

Up rises Jesus who would have to face down the scribes, the Pharisees, and experts in the Law, and to reformulate the said Law into a New Covenant, a covenant written not on paper, but in our hearts.

Up rises Jesus who would go on to proclaim the coming Kingdom of Heaven against the backdrop of Rome, the greatest kingdom on earth at that time.

The uprising of Jesus was not meant to overthrow earthly principalities, as much as those principalities deserved to be overthrown in the first place. No, this uprising has in its crosshair the power of Satan, the legacy of sin and the grip of death on humanity, ever since the Garden of Eden, the Fall from God’s grace.

Just as the ministry of Jesus would be seemingly put to the end, by his limp body hanging on a cross, God did the unimaginable.

*“God raises Jesus from the death, and exalted him even more highly, and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:9-11)

It's wild, isn't it? Who could've thought that up? Who could've put that in motion, but the Triune God, who created us, who redeems us and who continues to sustain us, through the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts, in communities of faith, in around the world.

I will leave with you this thought, originated from MaryAnn McKibben Dana, a writer and Presbyterian minister (of the PCUSA). She describes, in an article published online through the Christian Century magazine, how she and a close friend and colleague of hers, would bless each other with these words, "May the wild beasts minister to you."

It is a misreading of the text, McKibben Dana readily admits—after all, it was the angel who attended and ministered to Jesus, not the wild beasts. But as she calls it, it is a "faithful misreading", for when ministry gets tough, when life gets too complicated, and the comforting presence of an angel no longer cuts it, sometimes we all need a bit of the wild beasts, those who were simply 'with' Jesus. We all need to be reminded that out of trials and tribulations come Christ, who is trailblazing ahead of us, breaking down barriers, laying down the way for us to follow, the way to God, in praise and to the glory of the Triune God.

So, may the wild beasts minister to you.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**