

Served by Angels
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 February 18, 2018

Genesis 9:8-17

8Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

1 Peter 3:18-22

18For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Mark 1:9-15

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Kate Bowler was a 35-year-old professor, married to her high-school sweetheart, a new mother of a son when she got the news. The stomach pains she'd been having were not her gallbladder, she had cancer. Stage 4 cancer.

Her first thought? That can't be possible. I have a son.

Kate, as I mentioned, is a professor. A professor at Duke Divinity School whose research and writing focused on the Prosperity Gospel which is a theology, or pseudo-theology I would say, that suggests that if we pray right and live right that God will make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. Wealth and health are a gift from God, and the opposite, is some sort of indictment.

Tragedies are simply tests of character.¹

It is the reason a neighbor knocked on our door to tell my husband that everything happens for a reason.

"I'd love to hear it," my husband said.

"Pardon?" she said, startled.

"I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying," he said, in that sweet and sour way he has.

My neighbor wasn't trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. Because the opposite of #blessed is leaving a husband and a toddler behind, and people can't quite let themselves say it: "Wow. That's awful." There has to be a reason, because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.

One of the most endearing and saddest things about being sick is watching people's attempts to make sense of your problem. My academic friends did what researchers do and Googled the hell out of it. When did you start noticing pain? What exactly were the symptoms, again? Is it hereditary? I can out-know my cancer using the Mayo Clinic website. Buried in all their concern is the unspoken question: Do I have any control?

I can also hear it in all my hippie friends' attempts to find the most healing kale salad for me. I can eat my way out of cancer. Or, if I were to

¹ Kate Bowler, "Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me," February 13, 2016.

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/death-the-prosperity-gospel-and-me.html?mwrsm=Email&_r=0

follow my prosperity gospel friends' advice, I can positively declare that it has no power over me and set myself free.

The most I can say about why I have cancer, medically speaking, is that bodies are delicate and prone to error. As a Christian, I can say that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here, and so we get sick and die.

Cancer requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn't realize I had made.

But cancer has also ushered in new ways of being alive. Even when I am this distant from Canadian family and friends, everything feels as if it is painted in bright colors. In my vulnerability, I am seeing my world without the Instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.

Why do I bring all of this up? Because of something in scripture that is unique to the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, Jesus doesn't go into the wilderness willingly. Jesus is "Driven" into the wilderness. Cast out. Expelled. Thrown into. Vomited. It is a fierce force, but also one that most translators communicate as something that happens without violence.²

In the wilderness, Jesus is tempted, tested by Satan. Satan should not be understood as a devil here in Mark. Not Sauron from Lord of the Rings or Darth Vader from Star Wars, but anyone whose mind is not set on God's way. Anyone who would distract from the faithful way. A pastor I used to know preached, "To personify Satan is to exonerate ourselves." The point of the temptations in the wilderness is not to blame someone or something else, it is to look within ourselves. There is no, "the devil made me do it." Jesus is, in the wilderness, tempted. Really tested. There is no indication that these temptations, these tests, are anything but real. Jesus does not give in.

We're also told that there are wild beasts in the wilderness. While there are some who suggest that this is a way in which Jesus is fulfilling prophecy, the wolf with the lamb, the calf and the lion, there seems to be more textual evidence to suggest that this is not Jesus at work as much as it is Jesus surviving in a difficult place.³

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/02/the-beloved-tested-son.html>
http://biblehub.com/greek/ekballei_1544.htm

³ <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001492356&site=ehost-live>
 Caneday, Ardel B. 1999. "Mark's provocative use of scripture in narration: 'he was with the wild animals and angels ministered to him'." *Bulletin For Biblical Research* 9, 19-36. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed February 17, 2018).
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001495525&site=ehost-live>

And then the angels. The word there is to serve. Not celestial beings in this case, but ones who serve, who help, who take care.⁴

The casserole you took to the person who just got home from the hospital.

Stopping by the side of the road to help someone change a tire.

Taking in a foster child.

Staying on the phone until the tears stop.

A lunch, sitting with the kid who usually sits alone.

Angels in regular clothes, without wings, but messengers for God.

This is what happens in Lent. In the wilderness, for Jesus.

Jesus was not sent into the wilderness to suffer, he goes into the place where he can learn that he can do hard things. The time in the wilderness is not about suffering, it is about strengthening, about testing, about learning.

There is a difference between everything happening for a reason and our being able to do hard things.

Blogger, author, Glennon Melton writes in her 2013 book “Carry On Warrior,”

I think we’re all scared that there’s something wrong with us and that’s what’s holding us back from doing things that are good—that we have to figure ourselves out before we go out there and help others. For me, everything is continually falling apart no matter how much I think I have it together.....We’re realizing that things can be messy and you can still be engaged—it’s just being human that makes us messy.

Marriage, life, and parenting—it’s hard, not because you’re doing it wrong. It’s just hard. What makes it better is coming together and telling the truth and knowing there’s no magic cure to the hardness. One of our mottos is: We can do hard things.

The world doesn’t need more “strong” superheroes hiding the truth of who they really are beneath capes of perfection, shame, cruelty, snark, addiction, or apathy. We need more plain old “weak” people who are brave enough to come out of hiding. We need more messy, honest, fully human beings who will volunteer to tell the truth about who they are - who will live shamelessly out in the scary, messy world. It’s braver to be Clark Kent than it is to be Superman

Heil, John Paul. 2006. "Jesus with the wild animals in Mark 1:13." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 1: 63-78. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost(accessed February 17, 2018).

⁴ <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark1x9.htm>

And I think that's one of the biggest lessons for us to take away from Jesus' time in the wilderness. It isn't time to show us how we are different, it shows us how we are the same, how we, too, have things to learn and how we, too, can do hard things.

39.6% of students in Greenbrier County qualify for free lunch, which means that their family income is below \$15,171. These statistics are not okay with Jesus.

But did you also know that 7 of the elementary schools provide universal meals at no cost?⁵ And several schools are providing snacks and other needed items on weekends through a snack backpack program? And Meals on snow days? Angels at work.

Depending on what statistics you look at, the events in Parkland, Florida this last week were either the 3rd or the 18th event like that since January 1. Neither number is okay with me. Neither of those numbers is okay with Jesus.

What will the angels in our midst, the Clark Kents who are all around us, do? How can we get to work on this hard thing to make this world more like the one God imagines?

I bring these things up because of what happens right after Jesus is in the wilderness, *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

The kingdom of God was not a private, personal statement of faith. It was a proclamation about the meaning of his baptism and the places we are all called to go. The way we are called to live.

And so it is for us. In Lent we are each invited to embark upon a spiritual discipline—giving something up, taking something on and allow the illumination that provides and take it out into the world.

God may not have created many of the problems we are facing, but God will and does meet us there, to show us the way out, a better way.

⁵ <https://mountainmessenger.com/greenbrier-co-schools-provide-meals-to-students-at-no-cost-at-7-of-the-elementary-school-for-the-2017-2018-school-year/>

Where we take the things Jesus says about worshipping God, loving our neighbor, feeding the hungry, and setting aside our swords and to allow that to guide our lives.

And at the end of this wilderness season, we won't just remember, we will know. We aren't just Clark Kents, we are children of God. Beloved and called. And we cannot go backwards. We cannot.

And if we listen to God, we will not.
This I believe.

Amen.

Desert Prayer (not read in the sermon, but worth reading)

I am not asking you
to take this wilderness from me,
to remove this place of starkness
where I come to know
the wildness within me,
where I learn to call the names
of the ravenous beasts
that pace inside me,
to finger the brambles
that snake through my veins,
to taste the thirst
that tugs at my tongue.

But send me
tough angels,
sweet wine,
strong bread:
just enough.

—Jan Richardson
from *In Wisdom's Path: Discovering the Sacred in Every Season*