

BETWEEN WILD BEASTS AND ANGELS

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March 1, 2009

First Sunday in Lent

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:9-15

Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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Some of you, I know, have stumbled into a wilderness haunted by beasts with no angels in sight. Take heart. Angels are nearby. In fact, the beasts themselves may be angels. Breathe deep, listen attentively, and let the wild transform your spirit.

Perhaps you've noticed that we live between wild beasts and angels in more ways than one. We are little more than beasts and little less than angels.

Psalm 8 puts it like this: *when I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have made, what are humans that you care for them. Yet you have made them just a little lower than angels, or as some translations have it, a little lower than gods.* Which is to say, we are more than physical, biological beings, more than descendents of chimpanzees.

We don't need the Bible to tell us that. We see evidence everyday. We are little less than angels. But, then again, let's not forget: we are little more than beasts. If you have children you know what I'm talking about!

Thanks to Charles Darwin we now know that we are most emphatically descendents of wild beasts, reptiles and protozoans. Billions of years of animal DNA, animal instincts and appetites prowl and howl in our blood. And that explains a lot.

It explains our chronic default to tribalism. It explains some of our addictive behavior. It explains our survival of the fittest mentality. It explains why education, New Year's resolutions, and religion only work up to a point. Billions of years of animal instincts, appetites and DNA.

We know what we are; and we know we ought to be. Where does the "ought" come from? Do you like brainteasers? Here's a doozy from philosophy: How do you get from *is* to *ought*?

We are children of beasts. But there's more to us than that. We ask questions in a way animals don't. We crave more and more knowledge. Nothing can stop us from reaching for the fruit just beyond our grasp. We are on a quest with no map and no end in sight unless, perhaps, Jesus is evolution's glimpse of our unclaimed potential.

We live between wild beasts and angels. It appears that evolution has produced a species that reflects its own mad creative genius. Out of the animal world has arisen a species embodying the mysterious, creative power itself, the image of God as the poet of Genesis puts it.

Humans have capability for great good and, as it turns out, capability for great destruction. That's the human predicament. No one escapes.

What, then, shall we do?

Like Cain we destroy those we love. Like God in the story of the flood we would destroy the whole world in order to save it. Power can make us insane!

But guess what? Cain repented. And God repented. And we can, too.

We can return to the promise held in the heart of the Great Ancestors—the promise that we shall find a way to be a blessing to all families and peoples of the whole earth. Yes, we can overcome fear, greed, and tribalism. It's a promise sustained from generation to generation. It's the promise we feed on with Jesus at this communion table.

The time is now. The place is here. Turn around and be transformed. Believe the good news: the world is good; we mess up terribly; and yet grace abounds. There is much good work to be done on earth. No one said it would be easy. I guess that's why we call it work.

Some of you, I know, have stumbled into a wilderness haunted by beasts with no angels in sight. Take heart. Angels are nearby. Breathe deep. Listen carefully.