



Rev Helen Jacobi
Wilderness

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

Year B Lent 1

21 February 2021

There is a pre recorded video version of this sermon going to be playing in the online worship of some of the churches in our international network today. We nearly had to use it ourselves this week until we safely made it out of our mini lockdown. For the next few weeks we will also receive sermons from our partner churches. We will share them online – an extra Lent bonus for you all – more sermons!

On this first Sunday of Lent we always hear of Jesus in the wilderness. The 40 days of his time in the wilderness give us the 40 days of Lent. In Mark's version we don't have the detail of the temptations that Matthew and Luke bring. We have instead the stark picture of Jesus being baptized, hearing those wonderful words "You are my Son the beloved; with you I am well pleased" and then "immediately" being driven into the wilderness.

This baptism is not a Sunday morning ceremony for family and friends – it is a dramatic public event with dire consequences. "Immediately" he is driven into the wilderness.

Often I think in previous Lenten sermons we have heard Lent described as a wilderness opportunity. A time for retreat, for refreshment, for refocusing. It is something we choose and

even if it involves giving up something to do it or giving up something for Lent we feel better for it.

Or sometimes we might hear the wilderness described as those times in our lives when we are grieving a death or a loss; we know it is a path that must be travelled and again we are told we will come out of this wilderness strengthened and renewed.

This Lent our experience of wilderness is so much more than before. The whole world is living this wilderness. A wilderness of illness, death, fear, blame, crazy theories and conspiracies. Wherever you are from, whichever corner of the earth you are in this wilderness.

Like the flood that covered the known earth in the time of Noah, this pandemic reaches to every corner of the globe. The numbers who have died; the numbers who are ill; the numbers who have lost work and livelihoods are too big for us to take in. The inequities of suffering too are massive. There is the lack of health care in many places and those carrying the burden of economic loss are often those already with precarious income. Then the people separated across the world, seafarers who never get to go home, refugees caught in camps for much longer periods – the list is endless.

These things are Mark's wild beasts of the wilderness.

And behind these outcomes are the wild beasts of lack of leadership from some governments, lack of action which have allowed the pandemic to deepen and to spread. Even in a country like NZ where we have had excellent leadership we suffer every time the larger countries of the world allow the pandemic to reign. Our borders remain closed, families are separated, families cannot travel to see dying loved ones or for celebrations.

There are plenty of beasts in this wilderness. But there are also angels. Angels we are told waited on Jesus. They served him – the word used for waiting/ serving is the same word as a “deacon,” a servant in the church and community.

So who are our angels in this wilderness? Health workers obviously – many who have died overseas because of their service.

Workers caring for the elderly and the vulnerable. Those working on our streets with people who are homeless. In NZ we have thousands of people working in our quarantine hotels who look after arriving travelers who must spend 2 weeks in isolation. They are our angels.

Angels are also messengers. The word angel means messenger. Messengers who speak the truth – our health care professionals again. And scientists who explain what is going on so we can understand why we need to act the way we do. And the vaccinators who are working across the world to bring us protection. And we can be angels to each other – reminding each other why we need to wear masks and keep our distance even when it seems not necessary. We can be angels to each other reaching out across our neighbourhood fences and supporting each other as best we can.

We know there are 100s of great stories about neighbours and new friendships and ways people helped each other in lockdown.

But also 100s of stories of people who feel very alone.

So we are called to be angels – both in serving and in speaking words of truth and comfort.

We walk in this wilderness together and hope to hear the words of angels bringing us the message that the end is in sight. We need to see that rainbow that Noah saw; the promise that the world would never again suffer such a calamity.

One of the ways we are responding to our sense of being in the wilderness is our Lament for Love gathering on Tuesday March 9. This will be a time of reflection and prayer and in particular reaching out to loved ones overseas. We will livestream the gathering and will encourage participants to share the link so loved ones overseas can feel the love.

And then for the rest of our Lenten programme – 4 sessions after church we are having a “nothing to do with covid” series – on art and the way we engage our faith in artistic expression. We will take time to slow down and stop and look at the beautiful works that can inspire our faith. First up next week is looking at our own stained glass windows.

May the wilderness of this Lenten time give us the strength to journey to the end of our global wilderness. And we walk this journey with the One who has been there before us, the beloved Son.