

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander
Mark 1: 9-15
“Lenten Angels”
1st Sunday in Lent
February 22, 2015

I’ve been in church most of my life and have always found it fairly common for people to celebrate after a baptism with some sort of luncheon with friends and family. I have never heard of anyone being driven out into the wilderness and left there to fend for themselves for 40 days. We’ve talked about the wilderness before and the scriptures usually describe it as a dangerous place. The wilderness is a place where wild animals are on the prowl, where people often feel deserted, where life is hard, and where one might become bewildered and disoriented. The wilderness is not a safe place.

And yet Jesus was taken there, driven out with the force of an exorcism (it’s the same word in the Greek) from his baptismal experience, with the words from heaven still ringing in his ears, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.” No – we don’t take our children out into the wilderness after they are baptized – after telling them that they are God’s children and that they belong to this family of faith – but we all end up in the wilderness at some point. And it is in the wilderness that we have to wrestle with this claim upon our lives until we surrender our will and allow the Spirit to use us for the sake of the good news.

Mark doesn’t tell us nearly as much as the gospel writers Matthew and Luke. They both give us details about what happened in the wilderness. But not Mark – just that he was tempted by Satan, that he was with the wild animals, and that the angels waited on him. Let’s take a quick look at each of these statements.

The Greek word for Satan means adversary or opponent. Jesus is being challenged. Almost as if Satan wants to strip him of the title that had just been given to him at his baptism, he tempts him or tests him. The word can be understood either way. Temptation is often seen in a more negative light. When we are tempted we understand it as entertaining an idea that takes us off course and invites us to be someone we are not – to do something that is not consistent with our true identity – to stray from what is right and good for self or neighbor or God. Testing, on the other hand, involves a strengthening and a preparation for something ahead – like how a math test prepares you for a Final Exam – or like someone testing your trustworthiness to see if you are worthy of greater responsibility.

We experience both testing and temptation every day. Both give us an opportunity to confirm our true identity as God’s Beloved and brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus was with the wild animals. Some have suggested that this is a sweet picture of Jesus communing with nature almost like we imagine Adam back in the Garden of Eden hanging out with all the animals that God has just made. But I don’t buy that. In the wilderness, the animals are wild and they represent the danger of this place. It is not the kind of place that a human being wants to be. It isn’t safe and it isn’t pleasant.

Both the testing by Satan and the presence of the wild animals remind us of Jesus humanity and vulnerability.

The presence of the Holy Spirit and the divinely appointed angels remind us of Jesus’ divinity. He is God’s anointed and God has a purpose and plan for the Messiah that will not be sidelined. These angels – God’s messengers – are there to care for Jesus in the midst of this wilderness experience – perhaps to remind him of his baptism – perhaps to strengthen him for his journey – perhaps to encourage him in the midst of his temptation.

The NRSV translates the work of the angels “they waited on him.” This doesn’t mean they sat around and waited until Satan was finished with him. It means that they attended to him. They ministered to him. The word is *diakuneo*. It is where we get our word Deacon – those who are called and ordained to the caring ministries of the church. We often say

that the first Deacons didn't come along in the church until Acts 6. But perhaps these angels were really the first Deacons!

I have this image in my mind of Jesus as Rocky Balboa. He and Satan are in this grand boxing match – wild animals running all around providing distraction and nipping at Jesus heels and keeping him off balance. After each round of the fight Jesus returns to his corner where the angels care for him and give him water and encourage him before the bell sounds and the next round begins.

That may sound crazy, but that is how life feels sometimes. We go out there and it seems like we get beat up by life's tests and temptation – whether you believe those jabs are coming at you from Satan or not isn't the point – the pain is real. There are days when we feel pretty bruised and exhausted and we might be ready to throw in the towel – on some relationship – on faith – on church – on life – but God's messengers are there to remind us that we belong to God and that we are God's beloved and that God has something amazing for us as we live out the good news of the gospel.

Why did Jesus need angels to minister to him? Because he was human. He was flesh and blood. He got hungry and thirsty and tired and he sweat and bled and cried. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that he can sympathize with our every weakness because he was tested just as we are. Friends - if the Son of God needed to be attended to by the angels – how much more you and I??

The Charlotte Observerⁱ has been running a series of articles about *Everyday Angels*. These are people who have unexpectedly stepped in to make a difference in the lives of others. We hear about it all the time. Oh – you are such an angel!

Here are a few headlines that they have run over the past several months:

- “The Angel delivered heating oil”
- “Helpers Step In with a ride after a train wreck”
- “Homeless man steps in to fix a flat tire”
- “Angels came to the rescue pushing a car to safety”
- “West Coast Angel reaches out to women roofers in Rutherfordton”

These are just normal people – using their gifts and abilities and time to respond to a need. It's something that any of us might get caught doing on any given day.

- Angel delivers food to Ada Jenkins
- Angel sits with woman at hospital bedside
- Angel holds the hand of a grieving parent
- Angel visits lonely man estranged from family
- Angel helps someone who has fallen

You see - I don't doubt that angels are a part of life. They are God's messengers – sent by God to do God's bidding. But I'm not sure that they always have to be winged and dressed in white and have a bright light around them. They might be dressed just like you and me – they might look just like you and me - for God is sending us too and calling us to be messengers to one another. We are like that support team for the boxer in the corner of the boxing ring – encouraging them, pumping them up for the next round – giving them some cool water to refresh them and helping them to gain the courage to get up and go again.

I don't know about you – but there are definitely days when I could use that.

This morning we are commissioning our newest class of Stephen Ministers. These are people who have been trained – in many ways – to be angels to us. They are prepared to walk with others during life's difficult situations – illness, grief, separation, divorce, the sudden loss of ability or the death of a loved one. They are in our corner – listening, encouraging, cheering us on and helping to prepare us for the next round.

There is an old Shel Silverstein's poem, entitled “Helping.”ⁱⁱ Part of the poem states...
And some kind of help
Is the kind of help

That helping's all about
And some kind of help
Is the kind of help
We all can do without.

Well – the help and support and love that the Stephen Minister's offer is the kind of help that *helping's all about*. And really, they are great role models for all of us. They remind us that God calls us to demonstrate love and compassion and kindness to one another – to forgive one another and to offer mercy to each other.

I know that there are times when we don't do a great job of that. Lots of people have lots of stories of how they have been hurt rather than helped by folks in church. But God calls us to more than that so that we can effectively proclaim and live out the good news of the gospel.

That is what we see Jesus doing. During his wilderness experience, he was ministered to by the angels. And then we find him, in the next round, proclaiming the good news of the gospel and inviting others to come and experience this good news by repenting and turning their lives over to God.

Brian Zahnd is the head pastor of Word of Life Church – a non-denominational congregation in Missouri. In a video that I recently watched he speaks about how we are called to invite others who are skeptical about faith to come and see for themselves what the church is about. He says – as God's people we are called to be a community of love and that is what changes people's minds. But he wrestles with the idea wondering if he should first warn his congregation so that they will be on their best behavior when these visitors come. He acknowledges that the church is not perfect and that many people are hurt by others in the church but that ultimately Jesus works transformation in us as a community to the point of being able to live this out. He has hope that the Church of Jesus Christ can continue to be a unique community where the love of God is lived out and practiced – even in the midst of our imperfections and brokenness.

I think one of the ways that we do that is by learning to care for one another on our various wilderness journeys. The Lenten season, known for its focus on prayer, and fasting, and giving to the poor, is symbolic of this journey of transformation. On our journeys we are tested and perhaps tempted by other ways of being in the world. But Jesus continually invites us to a faithful walk with him and with each other. And we are called to be angels to one another who minister to each other during these days so that together we might remain faithful to God's calling in our lives.

Our Theme for Lent this year is "I Believe – We Trust." As we affirm our own faith we are also called to live it out in community with one another as we learn what it means to trust God and to trust one another. Our life together in community is to be, in and of itself, an affirmation of the faith which we profess.

Several years ago I heard David Lamotte sing a song written by Chuck Brodsky called "We Are Each Other's Angels." I realize that I am taking some liberties with Mark's text, but it seems to me that in order to be the church that God calls us to be we must respond to God's call to love and serve one another – to be that angel in someone's corner who is comforting them through whatever they are going through or encouraging them and preparing them for whatever is next. Our Stephen Ministers do this in a special way but we can do this for each other too, every single day. Perhaps God is calling us as God's messengers – as angels – to minister to one another on life's wilderness journey.

(SING _ We Aare EachOthers Angels)

Well I hope I see you later
'Cause it's time for me to go
Someone just pulled over
Sure was good to know you
Go answer your calling
Go and fill somebody's cup
And if you see an angel falling
Won't you stop and help them up

(Chorus:)

'Cause we are each other's angels
And we meet when it is time
We keep each other going
And we show each other signs

Sometimes you will stumble
Sometimes you might fall down
Sometimes you will get lonely
When there's nobody around
You might shiver when the wind blows
And you might get blown away
You might even lose your colors
But don't you ever lose your faith

(Chorus)

Thank you for the water
I thought I was gonna die out here in the desert
But you quenched my thirst
Let's break a little bread together
I've got a little manna
It was a gift
From somebody who was passing by
And offered me a lift
Now go answer your calling
Go and fill somebody's cup
And if you see an angel falling
Won't you stop and help them upⁱⁱⁱ

(Chorus)

I close with a poem written by Ruth Burgess entitled **Desert.**

The desert waits,
Ready for those who come,
Who come obedient to the Spirit's leading;
Or who are driven,
Because they will not come any other way.

The desert always waits,
Ready to let us know who we are –
The place of self-discovery.

And whilst we fear, and rightly,
The loneliness and emptiness and harshness,
We forget the angels,
Whom we cannot see for our blindness,
But who come when God decides
That we need their help;
When we are ready
For what they can give us.^{iv}

Friends – it is the season for Lenten Angels. Are we ready to receive them? Are we ready to be them?

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/everydayangels/>

ⁱⁱ Shel Silverstein, "Helping" in Where the Sidewalk Ends, 1974.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chuck Brodsky, © 1995

^{iv} Ruth Burgess, in Bread of Tomorrow, ed. Janet Morley (London: SPCK and Christian Aid, 1992), pp. 67-68.