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 “The Journey of Transformation: Temptation”  
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 West Side Christian Church

Mark 1:9-15

My favorite childhood story is the beautifully illustrated, “Where the Wild Things Are,” by Maurice Sendak. In fact, every summer, this is the story I choose to read to the kids at Tuesday Tales here at the church. The story is about a little boy named Max who, in the dark of night, is confronted by the scariest, ugliest wild creatures that one might imagine. He eventually confronts the beasts, stands up to them, and makes them his friend.

It is not difficult to understand why children love this story. It is about those dreaded figures that terrify children when the light is turned off, they are in bed, and playthings in the room take on an ominous, spectral form. To confront those nocturnal fears, to stare them down and make them friends, this thrills young hearts.

Of course, most of us here this morning are adults. We no longer are tempted to scream when the lights are turned out and we lie there in the dark. We know that's not a ghost; it's only our bathrobe hanging on the door. That's not a beast crouching, ready to jump; it's only our accustomed easy chair in the corner.

We are no longer afraid of the dark. We know that there's nothing in the dark waiting to jump us. But I wonder....are we justified in not having a fear of the dark? Do our children know more than we know?

You see, no sooner has Jesus come up from the waters of baptism than, Mark says, God drives Jesus out into the darkness, into the desert to be tempted forty days by Satan and the wild beasts. In a similar way, no sooner have we been reminded of our own baptisms, just over a month ago, that we are now thrown out into the wilderness of Lent.

Jesus' vocation and purpose, our vocation and purpose is being connected to temptation, wild beasts, and wilderness time. Mark is linking mission with temptation. In other words, following Jesus means being tempted by evil—it means, at times, spending time in the dark. Are you sure we are justified in not having a fear of the dark?

I fear this story. In particular, I fear those wild beasts. Is not temptation like this - some wild thing waiting to jump us? Back in Genesis, Cain is warned that, if he does well, fine. But, “Take care, sin is crouching at the door.” Sin is the wild beast crouching outside the door, waiting to take us as prey.

I fear the darkness of Lent. I fear being driven into the wilderness by God to be tempted by the wild beasts within me. Because it's there that I am forced to look into the mirror....to come to terms with who I really am....to acknowledge my mortality, my

finitude, my sinfulness...and to give myself to God in order that I might be transformed. I fear the darkness of Lent. What about you?

I remember hearing about a large congregation a few years ago, whose lay leader called a colleague of mine. He called, saying, "I need to talk. I have no one else to talk to. Last week I discovered that our associate pastor has embezzled \$20,000 from the church. Yesterday, another associate has revealed that his wife has been having an affair with our senior pastor."

Believe it or not, I was not shocked to hear this story. Unfortunately, this story has become all too common in the church; not only for clergy, but for all of us. The wild beasts are always crouching just outside the door....they are always lurking within each of us.

While I wasn't shocked, I did feel a deep sense of sadness when I heard that this layperson went on to say, "Here are two men who have been spiritual guides for me, mentors, better people than I. One explains to me why it was necessary for him to steal from the church. Another tells me why it was okay for him to betray his marriage vows. It does something to a layperson to hear that."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most powerful "wild beast" with which our Lord had to wrestle, with which each of us must wrestle everyday, sometimes goes by the name of "rationalization," other times by "justification," but most of the time it goes by the name of "self-deceit."

It's that wild beast within that says, "I am a person of God; I have made great sacrifice to be here. I go about doing so much good for so many. Therefore the rules are made for lesser mortals, not for me." Are you sure we are justified in not having a fear of the dark?

We have all heard the quote, "The greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world he did not exist." If temptation is real, if it is truly a wild beast, it most certainly is deceptive. Temptation is never obvious, definitely not a caricature: "Hi, I am Satan; I am here to tempt you." The tempter often looks and sounds like a friend or relative. "Get behind me, Satan!" was not Jesus' word to the local fiend but to his friend, Simon Peter.

And at the heart of the deception are offers not to fall but to rise. The tempter in Eden did not ask, "Do you wish to be as the devil?" but "Do you wish to be as God?" "If you are really the Son of God. . .," says the voice in Jesus' mind. No self-respecting Satan would approach a person with offers of personal, social and professional ruin.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William. "Jesus Versus Wild Beasts." *Pulpit Resource*. Inver Grove Heights: Logos Productions, March 1, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Fred. "Test Run." *The Christian Century*. February 22, 2003. Pg. 29.

So what do the wild beasts look and sound like in your life? Do they try to convince you that you don't need the grace of God, that you can live a good life by our own efforts? Do they tell you that religion is to help you make it through the day or the week—that it is about us rather than about God? Do they promise you, you can find security in your bank account and investments, job or family, instead of in God? Do they convince you that self-righteousness is okay—that it is natural to look down on others, being critical and judgmental, thinking less of those different from us?

Robert Coles spent the summer of 1960 in Mississippi interviewing folk, black and white, caught up in the troubles there. He interviewed a white supremacist named John, spending hours listening to this man who had planned crimes of hate. What made him do it? What made him brag about horrible deeds? What made this apparently rather decent man stoop to such evil?

Coles later wrote in *Children of Crisis*, “We must all know the animal in us can be elaborately rationalized in a society until an act of murder is called self-defense, and dynamited houses become evidence of moral courage.”<sup>3</sup>

No, as adults, we no longer mistake the bathrobe for a monster or the easy chair for a beast. But everyday, we mistake sin for faithfulness. We rationalize and justify the wild beasts within in us as acceptable parts of who we are. Are you sure we are justified in not having a fear of the dark?

This past Wednesday, we began the Lenten Journey with ashes on our foreheads, reminding us that “to dust we shall return,” that we are mortals, that we are sinful. During these next forty days, we are called to stop depending so much on ourselves, our own finite ways, and to work toward depending more on God. This journey is one of transformation. It is a contemplative, reflective journey during which we seek to change those things within us that may be separating us from God and from one another.

This is not just a personal journey, but it is also a congregational one. The same wild beasts that lurk within each of us are the same wild beasts that lurk in our church. Personal and congregational transformation can only take place if we begin by confronting those beasts and work toward eradicating them.

Wild beasts, temptation, sinfulness, fear of the darkness....so where is the good news? Remember that while Jesus was in the wilderness, he was not only with the wild beasts, but Mark writes that there were also Angels with him, watching over him.

Wilderness time is a time to be confronted by the darkness in our lives, by the wild beasts that lurk in the corners, waiting to ambush us in the form familiarity and comfort. On the other hand, the same angels that watched over Jesus are the same angels that dwell within each of us, empowering and strengthening us to overcome those wild beasts. It is only when we choose to allow those angels, the light within us, to strengthen us, that we are able to truly overcome the temptations in our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Willimon, *Ibid.*

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside everyone. He said, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all."

"One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

"The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

Amen.