



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

...joyfully serving together in making disciples of Jesus Christ

February 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Once again, we begin the journey of following Jesus on His way to the cross of Calvary. Mark's Gospel gets us right into the action and movement of Jesus' ministry:

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him (Mark 1:12-13).

This brief temptation account differs from the more familiar versions in Matthew and Luke. Yet it offers one tidbit the other two synoptics leave out: "he was with the wild animals." That piques the curiosity. Why is it included? "Wild animals" stir up different pictures in one's mind. Howling mouths, snarling lips, and barred teeth, perhaps. There's something ominous about wild animals. Danger appears to be lurking all around. Or is it?

To be called a wild animal suggests one is brutish and untamed. No doubt you have experienced times in the parish that have felt like wild animals were on every side. The snarling lips and the howling voices of members can easily make it feel like danger is lurking all around. But is it?

Mark's inclusion of the wild animals may suggest additional dangers in Jesus' wilderness temptation, perhaps showing all the more how Jesus trusted His heavenly Father. As an undershepherd of the Lord, you are called to trust in Him despite any wild animals you sense surround you; especially when appearances are not always what they seem. If the devil did not hesitate to tempt the very Son of God, he certainly will not hesitate to assault you with vicious temptations, including when God's beloved people behave like animals. When that happens, there's a great temptation to abandon them, as well as the temptation not to trust the Lord.

Some believe the presence of wild animals in Mark's account indicates that God's eschatological activity is in view, especially since Isaiah foretold the role of such wild animals in the Messianic kingdom:

¹⁹Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my

chosen people, ²¹the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise (Isa. 43).

In other words, these wild animals are not beasts to be feared but testimonies that point us to God's plan of salvation. After all, sheep are prone to be wild and unruly. They need a shepherd who seeks out the lost, gathers up the fragile, and even lays down His life. A new thing indeed!

To be sure, Lent means pastors lead people on the journey with Jesus toward His cross, but we do so in the intensity of an increased workload that leaves us prone to exhaustion and increased temptations. Here, dear brothers, we must especially beware. Satan is the wild animal who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). So be on guard. The life of repentance you call your people to live is also the life you humbly model.

What's more, you can only give what you have first received yourself. That's why our Lord Christ, who was with the wild animals, has given Himself for you. He fills you with His Word of life, and even with His very body and blood under bread and wine that you might rest in Him and be renewed by Him. Therefore, as you bid your people journey with Christ, please journey with Him too, along with all the wild animals, all the way to the cross and empty tomb, that you might declare His praise.

Your brother in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford



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