

## Wild Beasts and Angels

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on The Transfiguration of the Lord, February 13, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Elie Wiesel is a haunting writer. When he was a boy in Rumania, he and his mother and father were forced onto railway freight cars and sent to a concentration camp. His mother was murdered the first day there, sent to the gas chambers and then into the crematorium. His father died just days before the camp was liberated by Allied soldiers.

After the war Wiesel became a journalist for a Yiddish newspaper in Paris. Although he was a writer, he made a vow never to write a single word about his experience in the concentration camp. The suffering of the Holocaust was so awesome that he felt that telling it in human words couldn't do justice to its horror.

In Paris, Wiesel became friends with another writer, Francois Mauriac. He came to idolize Mauriac but one thing annoyed him. Mauriac would often talk about <sup>The suffering of</sup> Jesus. Wiesel thought Mauriac overdid it. One evening, Wiesel got tired of Mauriac talking about Jesus and Wiesel blurted out, "Mr. Mauriac, you're forever talking about the suffering of Jesus, but I can tell you that I've with my own eyes seen little Jewish children suffer more than Jesus suffered."

Mauriac walked over to Wiesel, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, "Mr. Wiesel, I do believe that it is a mistake for you not to write about the Holocaust." Wiesel did write about his experience. Memories of pain, and suffering, memories

of darkness, despair and horror came pouring out. He wrote in Yiddish. His friend, Mauriac, had it translated and saw that it got published (Smedes, Shame). In English it has the title *Night* and it's one of the most gripping books I've ever read. I bought a copy of it years ago, when the boys were still little. After we got them to bed I went downstairs in my study to read a chapter. The story was so gripping that I could not put it down until I finished it at three in the morning.

~~Jesus also had a hellish experience.~~ I wonder if Jesus, like his fellow Jew, Wiesel, ever hesitated to say anything about the suffering of his temptation in the wilderness. <sup>of Judea.</sup> The Jordan valley and the adjacent wilderness have been known as the <sup>hellish</sup> haunt of hyenas, jackals, panthers, and even lions, all of which were in the time of Jesus by no means scarce. In biblical thought the wilderness was the traditional haunt of demons and the devil. In the Old Testament this wilderness area is called the "Devastation". Sand, crumbling limestone and scattered shingle combine to establish a desolate scene. The hills of sand are like dust heaps; the limestone is blistered and peeling, rocks are bare and jagged. Under the heat of the sun it becomes like a furnace.

And then there were the nights. <sup>Jesus spent in the wilderness</sup> Have you ever gone deep inside a large cave when the tour guide said: "In this part of the cave, sunlight can never reach. Let me show you how dark it would be without the light." All the lights are turned off and for a moment he speaks to you in the dark. It's so dark that you can't see anyone standing next to you. It's darkness so thick you could cut it with a knife. I wonder how dark the nights got ~~at night~~ when Jesus was in the wilderness with

Satan and wild beasts. Did Jesus awake from restless sleep at three or four in the morning and stare up into yawning darkness, wondering and writhing at the devastation taking place in his mind, and awaiting the dawn (Styron)? Jesus was in this hell, this devastation, this wilderness, forty days and forty nights, with wild beasts and tempted by Satan.

Jesus must have shared this story with his friends. How else would we know about it? ~~Perhaps, like Wiesel, he was reluctant, at first, to put this horrible experience into words. But he~~ <sup>Like Wiesel, who shared his experience</sup> decided to share it with his friends and followers. He decided to share it because, I'm sure, he wanted his experience to give strength to us under temptation. The wilderness of temptation is inevitable for anyone who walks the pathways of life. Each one of us has or will experience our own wilderness. *Dave Dravecky*

The early Christians treasured this story. Their Lord had night of the soul. In the face of martyrdom, when they were Lord, the memory of this story strengthened them to be faithful. Herded into the Roman arenas filled with wild beasts they realized they had also been with wild beasts. When in the dark night of soul "Is God good? Does God exist? Is this life all there is?" they found the story and found strength not to give into to the temptation to

LT 2-7-94  
**Overwhelmed by God**  
Looking back, [my wife] Jan and I have learned that the wilderness is part of the landscape of faith, and every bit as essential as the mountaintop. On the mountaintop we are overwhelmed by God's presence. In the wilderness we are overwhelmed by his absence. Both places should bring us to our knees; the one, in utter awe; the other, in utter dependence.  
—Dave Dravecky in *When You Can't Come Back*

Temptation comes in many forms. Ages ago, our Christian ancestors were tempted to deny that Christ was Lord at risk of being crucified, thrown to wild beasts or burned at the stake. Today we're more like to think of temptations to

steal, to lie, or to commit adultery but those aren't the worst kinds of temptations. Maybe the worst kind of temptation we have to deal with is the temptation to find no meaning in our suffering or in the suffering of others.

Consider Paul Longmore. He has hands, but he can't use them. He can't sit up much either because his back is severely curved. Nevertheless he wrote a large, scholarly book called *The Invention of George Washington*. He wrote it with his mouth, a pencil clenched in his teeth, pecking out letter after letter on a computer keyboard.

He tells us that his temptation was to give up hope and sink into despair. As a young man, he talked to a guidance counselor about wanting to earn a Ph. D. The counselor looked at Paul's crippled body and asked, "Why do you want to get a Ph.D? Nobody out there is going to hire you to teach."

"I want to be a scholar."

"Forget it, Paul, it's too tough; they aren't going to hire you. You've got to think of something else."

"But I want to be a historian."

"I know, but you've also got to be practical. The academic world is too competitive for the disabled; find another way (Smedes, Shame)."

I wonder how many days and nights Paul Longmore spent in the wilderness, hearing the whisper of Satan in his counselors words. Temptation comes in many forms. Perhaps the greatest temptation is to give up when we're discouraged; to give up entirely on hope when we're down at out; to believe that there's no

meaning in our suffering or in the suffering of others. Maybe that's the greatest temptation you and I will ever face; the temptation to find no meaning in suffering.

↳ Jesus was tempted in the wilderness to believe that there could be no meaning in suffering. He was tempted to avoid at any cost the suffering of rejection and the suffering of the cross in the wilderness. He had to deal with this temptation, not just forty days, but throughout his life right up to the very end. We believe that he overcame that temptation, yet he'll always bear the scars of his battle. He came out of the tomb on Easter more walking on wounded feet. Jesus chose the way of enduring suffering <sup>because he believed & trusted & hoped</sup> ~~in faith~~ that suffering has meaning. He chose the way of the cross so that we might have eternal life right here and now and in the world to come.

Almighty God, your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin. Give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your Spirit, that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.