

Jeff's Reflection on Mark 1:12-13 – January 17, 2021

If you watched the video of the story I told for this worship service, you will recognize this sheet of paper and the doodle drawing I did on it.

It looks rather chaotic – a single line scribbled all over the page, intersecting, looping, a roller-coaster gone wild!

I think that life sometimes feels like that – chaotic, no form or pattern or purpose.

I think today's scripture reading feels like that – like Stephen Leacock's famous rider who jumped on his horse and rode madly off in all directions.

Last week we read of Jesus being baptized, and then, the writer of the Gospel of Mark throws in one of his favourite words – 'immediately'.

Immediately the Spirit of God drives Jesus into the wilderness – the wilderness! The wilderness is not where you go for a relaxing camping trip, the wilderness is wild, is hot, arid, water is scarce, if you don't know where you are going, you can quickly be lost...you can die in the wilderness.

Forty days...40 days in the wilderness...the number harkens back to Moses leading the Hebrews from Egypt into a land beyond the Jordan River, leading them into a new way of being people, of being God's people, of being a new kind of community.

Forty days...in the wilderness... alone. Jesus has heard a voice from the heavens, the voice of God saying that he, Jesus, is God's beloved Son, and now Jesus is in the wilderness.

And in the wilderness, we are told, he is tempted by Satan – tempted. Jesus has been driven into the wilderness to decide whether he will trust that voice calling him beloved son. He is driven into the wilderness to hear other voices, tempting him either to reject the first voice or to use this newly proclaimed status to his own advantage.

Alone in the wilderness...but not alone. He was with the wild beasts, we are told. The wilderness was not populated by cute puppy dogs. The Judean wilderness was home to snakes, scorpions, bears and lions.

Jesus has gone from hearing the voice of God to a place of danger, a place of struggle, of intense anxiety and stress. The story has become chaotic, a swirl of oppressive wilderness isolation.

Life feels tangled, falling apart, chaotic, everywhere one looks there is no way out!

And then, just a few words appear in the reading – words that seem out of place in this wilderness experience.

We read: ‘and the angels waited on him.’

Wow! Jesus has been driven into the wilderness, this hostile, inhospitable, life-draining place, a place of wild beasts, a place of wrestling with what life and identity mean.

The angels waited on him – like a waiter, a server in a restaurant, or at a spa, or the person who leads you to your seat at an arena.

Jesus is not alone in this chaotic place. The angels are with him. The messengers of God are with him. There is something life-giving and life-affirming, even in this wilderness time and place.

The angels waited on him. I find that an encouraging statement, a reassuring statement, a blessing – a promise that we are never beyond God’s presence, God’s love.

Life can feel like an undefined scribble – the threat of attacks in the United States, the struggles to survive of refugees trying to cross seas in overcrowded boats, the struggle to survive of people with no home, no income, no support communities, the encroaching effects of climate change, plus a global pandemic, and for many in Canada the long days of a locked down society, are times of loneliness and solitude.

Where is God in all this – in all this scribbled chaos?

When I do this doodle exercise, I look for some kind of image, pattern, hidden form or message within the scribbles.

That might suggest that God is in the art, the images, we discover within the chaos. True, but true because it would be truer to say that we find the chaos within God rather than that we find God within the chaos. If the scribbles represent life, then God is the page that contains the scribbles, the lines, our lives. These lines are now somehow part of the page – just as we are part of God.

Whenever life seems to be just swirling around us, and whenever life seems perfectly settled and in control, we need to ‘see’ with the eyes and imagination of faith – see God everywhere. It may be easy to see God in a spectacular sunrise, but can we also then see God in the pile of clothes waiting their turn in the laundry machine? Can we empty a dishwasher not just as a chore to be done quickly, but as an experience of the sacredness of creation, an experience in which to linger; experience it as a dance between ourself and the dishes, the cups, the cutlery that we move from dishwasher to shelf, can we treasure the music of the clink of cutlery gently laid in a drawer, as we might lay an infant into its cradle?

The angels that wait on us may be the angels of the ordinary objects and tasks we do every day.

Maybe we look out our window and see someone walking down the street. What if we paused to contemplate that we are watching an angel walk down the street?

Maybe the angel who waits on us is the angel who phones to ask how we are, who texts to say ‘just thinking of you’, who waves while walking down the street.

Maybe in wilderness time we can imagine how we might be an angel to someone else, might help them find an image, a gift hiding inside life’s scribbles.

Jesus is in the wilderness, in a harsh, threatening, chaotic scribble. We aren’t told in what form or way the angels waited on him, but in that wilderness Jesus came to know that even there he was within God, he was part of God, God was within him, he existed in God’s love.

Perhaps, if God is the page on which the scribbles of life occur, maybe we can imagine God is the One who looks at this chaos, this scribble, and God sees us within the chaos. God sees each one of us, each one of us loved by God.

Even in the times when life seems like an out-of-control roller coaster, we can trust that voice of God that says we are loved by God, we are not alone.

Howsoever you are experiencing life at this time, you are not alone. Angels wait on you. God is on the same page as you. God is with you. God is with us. Now and always.

Thanks be to God. AMEN