

CARED FOR IN THE WILDERNESS

It's just a few words. Four words, to be specific. But it makes a huge difference in how to perceive Mark's account of Jesus' forty days of testing and temptation.

Four words: "... and angels attended him."

Yes, there were angels in the wilderness with Jesus. It's important to remember that. After the same spirit that descended on Jesus like a gentle dove at his baptism turned into a dive bomber—or as preacher and writer Barbara Brown put it, "a dove with claws, talons,"—and drove him out into the desert, angels were there with him.

Jesus wasn't alone during his time of trial. Of course he wasn't. God wouldn't allow that. It's not in God's nature to leave him or any of us alone in our struggles and challenges. God sent angels to go into the wilderness and be with his beloved Son in his time of need. And make no mistake about it, Jesus was in need.

I love the translation the New Century uses for this Scripture passage. "and the angels came and took care of him." Other translations say, "there were angels who ministered to him."

So, along with Satan, the wild beasts and everything else that's commonly found in the desert—heat that burns your skin, thirst that makes your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth, sand that blows around and gets in your eyes, snakes and scorpions and other creepy things—there were also some surprise guests who made an appearance: angels who "attended him." Who took care of him. Who ministered to him.

I think it's important to remember those angels as we hear this familiar story once again on this First Sunday in lent. They're easy to overlook. And they usually are. The two themes from this Gospel passage that are usually focused on are "temptation" and "repentance." Angels never seem to make the cut. They're mostly forgotten by us. But Mark remembered them.

Yes, Mark, in his lean, fast moving sixteen chapter Gospel—the shortest of the four Gospels—included the angels that met Jesus in his lonely wanderings on the other side of the Jordan River. In Luke's version of the same story, angels are left out entirely. In Matthew's Gospel, the angels only show up at the end,

after Jesus' encounter with the devil. But in Mark's Gospel, the angels are there with Jesus the whole time he was in the wilderness. For all forty days.

And it's not as if Mark has a thing for angels. He doesn't. Other than this story about Jesus' testing, angels rarely show up in his Gospel. And when they do make an appearance, they're simply a part of God's royal court. They're not down on earth helping people. So when Mark does include angels tending to Jesus in the desert, it's so uncommon that our ears perk up, and it causes us to pay attention and take note. Or at least it should.

Now, some people might think, but it's Lent. The focus of the Lenten season shouldn't be on heavenly angels serving and ministering. It should be on sin and sacrifice and resisting temptation and striving to get right with God. I would argue that paying attention to the angels who were there with Jesus in the wilderness doesn't negate Lent's call to repentance, or to strive to overcome our temptations, which are the wild beasts we encounter and the demons we wrestle with in our wilderness times. Those are definitely things we need to face head on and be honest about during the Lenten season.

But Lent is also a time to remember the angels who were present in Jesus' wilderness experience and are present in ours. It's a time to remember, as Mark does, that angels were there for Jesus from the very beginning of his forty-days in the desert, just like God was there with the Israelites every day of their forty-year desert journey in the wilderness. And just as God promises to be with us from beginning to end in the wild, lonely desert places of our lives.

Lent is a time to take stock of our lives, to come clean about the things that tempt us away from God's ways, and acknowledge the things that frighten us. An important part of our Lenten discipline is to truthfully confess, in the words of an old, prayer, "the harm we have done and the good we have left undone." Or, as Step 10 of every 12-Step program challenges, "to do a fearless moral inventory." But I also invite us to do another kind of inventory for Lent: to count the angels God has sent to be with us in the challenging, painful, trying times of our lives.

It seems to me that, given Jesus' experience of having angels minister to and care for him in the wilderness, Lent would be a very appropriate time to remember, celebrate and give thanks for those angels that showed up in our lives right when we needed them most—in moments when we were tired, thirsty, and surrounded by wild beasts—just like they did for our Lord.

Now, at this point I should say that our wilderness angels probably won't look like what we think they should look like. So, I wouldn't look for luminous beings in long white robes, or listen for the rustling of wings. Instead, angels can come to us in the guise of a person who stops by with a casserole or some

other meal when there was a death in the family, or in the honest, good-hearted human being who returned your wallet or purse—with all your money and credit card intact—to the customer service desk at the grocery store when you dropped or misplaced it.

Maybe one of those angels who is there for us is the friend who took you out to lunch during a rough time in your life, or who listened to your fears and grief after you had a big argument with someone you love. And sometimes our wilderness angels are the people who forgive us when we hurt or wronged them, and remind us, when we're weighed down with guilt and shame that, in the words of William Sloan Coffin, there "is more grace in God than sin in us."

I want to share something that happened to me almost forty years ago, that I would consider an angel experience. It happened in the winter of 1981. January or February it must have been. Penny and I had been married for only a few months, and I was working at the Chaplain Cadillac car dealership in Falmouth, which no longer exists. My job was in the parts department, retrieving automobile parts for the mechanics and looking up and ordering parts for customers.

Full disclosure. I was not a very good parts clerk. I only got the job because my best friend's father worked in the service department at Chaplain and put in a good word for me with the parts manager. He never told me he regretted going to bat for me . . . at least to my face! He was too nice a guy to tell me I really should find some other line of work. Which I eventually did, by the way!

Anyway, after work one evening I hopped into my vintage Ford Pinto and headed home. There was a light rain falling at the time—and it was just cold enough to freeze on the road and make for a slippery ride home. I swear I wasn't driving very fast—that's what I told Penny when I got home!—but I hadn't driven very far when I noticed a car up ahead, on the left, waiting to pull out onto the road from a side street.

Now, any halfway-intelligent driver would have waited until I had driven past them before pulling out. But the person behind the wheel of that car up ahead—I don't know if it was a man or a woman, so they will always be known to me as "that driver"—suddenly and unexpectedly pulled out right in front of me.

Did I tell you I happened to be driving on some black ice at the time.

Now, driving experts tell you, don't slam on the brakes when you're on an ice-coated road. But if any of those experts had been driving on an ice-coated road and had a car pull out fifty feet in front of them, I'll bet they'd have done exactly what I did. I slammed on the brakes. When a car pulls out fifty feet

in front of you and you believe you're about to broadside them, instinct takes over.

So I stomped on the brakes . . . and I immediately discovered why those experts warn you not to do that when you're driving on an ice-coated road. My car slid sideways toward the embankment.

My first, immediate thought was, "This is bad." And as I was sliding off the road and into the embankment, I saw that there was a significant body of water—I guess it was a pond or a river—down there, waiting to catch me. And I thought, "This is really bad." Thankfully—and normally I wouldn't give thanks for something like this happening—but thankfully my pinto crashed sideways into a tree. It was, by the way the only tree growing in that general area of the embankment, and it kept my car from sliding down into the water; which was very fortunate for me because I've heard that Volkswagen Beetles float, but I don't believe Ford Pintos do.

So there I was, in shock and disbelief, sitting there in my still running Pinto, twenty or thirty feet down an embankment, resting against a tree. What to do? I don't think I need to tell you that there was no such thing as cell phones back in the winter of 1981. So I got out of my car and looked up, helpless. I had no idea what I was going to do. And I swear to you, one of my first thoughts when I got out of my car was, "It looks like I'm going to be late for dinner. I hope Penny won't get mad."

Less than a minute after this happened to me, a car pulled over and a woman looked down the embankment at me. "Are you alright?" she yelled. Other than being run off the road, slamming sideways into a tree, and almost sliding into the water where I would have surely drowned, I'm fine," I said. On the inside. On the outside I responded to her, "I think so."

"I can't believe that car pulled out right in front of you," she said. "I saw the whole thing."

"What a coincidence," I thought. "So did I."

I didn't recognize that woman as an angel right away. I was too much in shock and stunned disbelief to figure that out then. And it seems that angels can attract other angels to the scene of an accident, because a guy in a pickup truck also pulled over to see what the problem was. And this guy in the pickup truck happened to be carrying a tow rope with a hook. After hooking the tow rope to my Pinto's bumper and putting it in neutral, the guy's pickup truck had the power to drag my Pinto up out of the embankment. It was right out of one of those truck commercials you see on TV. You know, "Ram Tough!"

It had only been about twenty minutes from the time of that accident to the time of my rescue. The passenger side front fender was crumpled, but

my car was still drivable. And after thanking the people who pulled over to help me, I drove off and made it safely the rest of the way home.

It was quite an experience. When I think of all the “what ifs,” it convinces me that God and God’s angels had been watching over me. What if that one tree hadn’t been there? What if my Pinto had hit the tree with its rear end, where the gas tank was located (remember how Ford Pintos were known to explode and burn if the gas tank was hit?)? What if my car had slid into the water? Would I have been able to get out? Or would I have drowned? What if that woman driving behind me had been too far back to see me slide off the road and drove straight past? What if the driver of that pickup truck didn’t care enough or had been too busy to pull over and see how he might help? What if he didn’t have a tow rope with him? What if the tow rope wasn’t strong enough to get my car out of there? What if he’d had a smaller truck and was unable to pull my Ford Pinto out of that embankment?

So, as I think back on that event, if you were to ask me right now, “Do you think God’s angels came to you to help you out that day?” my answer would be, “Do you really need to ask?” Yes. For sure. Without any doubt. Those individuals who stopped to help were definitely angels sent by God, who came and attended me when I was in the cold, slippery, dangerous wilderness embankment that day.

So, my friends, as we enter the season of Lent and remember Jesus being tested in the desert, and as we think about temptation and repentance and the sacrifices we might make as an expression of our love for God, I say to you, don’t forget about the angels. Mark didn’t forget them. I can tell you that I haven’t. And I pray that you won’t.

“... [Jesus] was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.” According to Mark, in the wilderness times of our lives, God’s angels can and do come to care for us. Sometimes it’s simply a matter of opening our eyes of faith to see them.

May angels come and attend you in your wilderness times this Lent, and always. Amen.