**Sermon, February 18, 2024**
**The First Sunday in Lent**
**"Devils, Beasts and Angels"**
**A Sermon by Rev. John Balicki**
**St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine**

"Hell is Empty and all the Devils are Here" – *William Shakespeare*

"When among wild beasts, if they menace you, be a wild beast." — *Herman Melville*

"Saint Anthony said, in his solitude, he sometimes encountered devils who looked like angels, and other times he found angels who looked like devils. When asked how he could tell the difference, the saint said that you can only tell which is which by the way you feel after the creature has left your company."
— *Elizabeth Gilbert, "Eat, Pray, Love"*

A classic movie plot is the family who goes on what they think will be a normal relaxing vacation and who encounters all sorts of strange people and situations. Perhaps Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness was a similar experience. OK it wasn't a vacation as it says the Spirit drove Jesus there but the odd companions? It said he spent his time tempted by Satan, with wild beasts and waited on by angels. We don't even know who won. What the score was. We just know Jesus came out of it, came out quite well when we get to the end but first let's do a deeper dive into each of Jesus' desert companions.

In the other two gospels, Matthew and Luke, which we read the other two years on this Sunday, Jesus has a more robust dialogue with the devil showing Jesus three specific temptations: food to a man who was very hungry, authority over all the kingdoms of the world, the ability to survive falling from the pinnacle of the temple. To each, Jesus has a strong rebuttal culminating with "You shall not tempt the Lord your God" It portrays a Jesus, yes hungry, but quite in command of the situation. The Jesus with the big Superman logo under his robe, the muscular Jesus. The picture today – a little different – he needed those angels.

Debie Thomas says it this way, "It has taken me a long time to shed the muscular Jesus of my childhood. To be honest, I sometimes still long for him. I long for his divinity — the certainty of it, the mighty, magical promise of it — to overwhelm his humanity like a bright and reassuring halo. But Lent isn't a season for unshakeable superheroes. It's a season for vulnerable creatures whose wilderness journeys are never easy or

straightforward. It's a season of shadow, a season when our certainties go into the fire and burn down to ash. It is a season of vulnerability, honesty, humility, and penitence." This vulnerable Jesus is reflected in our bulletin cover art, Ivan Kramskoi was a Russian artist who focused on portraying the complex humanity of his subjects.

It seems like Jesus was in this vulnerable place and who shows up next: the wild beasts. What did you think when you heard that? Did you hear it in a fearful or negative way? Poor guy he's alone in the desert and now he has to fend off a threat to his life? Or maybe more positive? Well at least he has someone to talk to and if he's lucky they'll catch him some food. I have to admit this latter possibility only occurred to me this year. It made me think of the classic children's book by Maurice Sendak, "Where the Wild Things Are". It was a book Karen and I read to our kids. If you don't know or remember the plot: Young Max is naughty, engaging in such mischief as chasing after the dog with a fork. His mother calls him a "wild thing," and, when he is cheeky to her, she sends him to bed without supper. Dressed in a wolf suit, Max is in such a rage that his bedroom starts to turn into a jungle and a boat appears. He sails to the land of the wild things, which are huge monsters with claws. Not frightened of anything, Max tames the wild things, who agree that he is the wildest of them all, and they make him their king. Max decrees, "Let the wild rumpus start," and he and the wild things dance in the moonlight, hang from the trees, and generally run riot, until Max realizes he misses his mother's love. Although the wild things beg him to stay, he returns to his bedroom, where his supper is waiting for him.

Perhaps rather than something to be feared, maybe these wild beasts helped tap some energy in Jesus that allowed him to dream of the coming kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace and justice and love where people had enough to eat and could live their lives without fear.

And finally the angels, Even in the land of shadow and starvation, even in the place where the wild beasts roamed, God's agents of love and care lingered. Even in the grimmest places, God abides, and somehow, without reason or explanation, help comes. Rest comes. Solace comes. Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we prefer, but they come. What did Jesus' angels look like? A comforting breeze, a trickle of water, the swirl of constellations in the night sky?

So something really big happened in those 40 days. We hear how Jesus came to Galilee and said "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near. This may be the

most important sentence Jesus ever spoke. Think about it, 1500 years after Moses, 1000 years after King David, 400 years after the last of the prophets, the Jewish people were waiting and waiting and waiting for the time to be fulfilled and most had given up. But here it was, some were ready to hear it and some weren't. But what brought Jesus to be in a place to make this incredibly bold and important announcement?

I think he learned he could withstand the temptations of Satan. He was strong enough not to go off course. I think he learned how to tap an energy within him that was rather wild and untamed. And he learned he still needed the angels to wait on him. He was human after all and needed rest and care and comfort.

What do we take away as we start this season of Lent? Well we probably don't need temptations but maybe we need that traditional view of Lent, a re orientation to keep us from going off track toward something that isn't good for us. Or maybe you need to tap into a wilder side of yourself, a more primal energy to meet the challenges of life head on. If so, as Max would have said, "Well let the wild rumpus begin". Or maybe life has been tough lately and you just need a few more angels in your life to provide comfort and healing. Just note they may not come in the forms you expect.

Three options, if any fit, make it or a number of them your Lenten prayer and journey. Hey we have 40 days to figure it out too. It may not all happen today. The Church calls us to this desert time. Are you ready to find out who your Lenten companions will be?