

Where the Wild Things Are¹

Happy New Year! Yes, we said that to one another in worship on the first Sunday of Advent, but January 1 marks the beginning of our calendar, the date when we begin writing—or intending to write 2024 instead of 2023. This is the first Sunday we have gathered for worship after the ball dropped in New York—along with the guitar in Nashville and the pickle in Mt. Olive. Many of us greeted one another with “Happy New Year!” this morning, so it is fitting that we begin this new year with a new beginning of another sort. We have been walking through the biblical narrative, the story of God and God’s beloved children since September. We began just after Labor Day with the second creation account in Genesis, the one where humanity is formed from the mud and the dust. We moved through stories of new beginning after God-given new beginning, of Jacob’s second chances, the people of ancient Israel’s new start after living being enslaved in Egypt, of the new hope in the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, and of yet another new beginning as the Temple was rebuilt after long years of exile. And so with the shiny New Year still mostly in front of us, we turn to another new beginning in the gospel of Mark. [Read Mark 1:1-20]

“New year, new you!” Written with at least one exclamation point and an upbeat font or a cheery voice, depending on whether the greeting comes in the form of an Instagram ad or a segment on the *Today* show. It happens every time we flip to a new page in the calendar—often a new shiny calendar with crisp unwrinkled, unstained pages if we’re doing it correctly. Yes, the year is still rather new and calendar pages are largely still crisp. The promise of a new beginning is still right in front of us, or at least an expectation from someone or somewhere that we’re primed for something shiny and new.

And then this morning’s gospel—Mark’s version—greet us with ancient words from the prophet Isaiah. Mark’s gospel, as you may know is the oldest, written down around the year 70 CE, at the time of the Roman siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the beloved rebuilt Temple. In other words, this gospel is

¹ With thanks to the book of the same name by Maurice Sendak.

written down in a time of chaos and uncertainty. No amount of new calendar pages or bold resolutions or giant, trendy water cups, jugs, or bottles could lead any of Mark's first hearers to believe that simply turning the page could make the world shiny and new. Instead, something dramatic, someone dramatically different would be their only hope. So they head to the wilderness to be baptized by John. One scholar joked that John is a snappy dresser in a camel's hair sport coat, but the truth is his ensemble is the stuff of an unruly, fiery prophet. His camel's hair tunic, his leather belt, and his unusual diet all point to the prophet Elijah, the one who is expected to prepare the way for God's Messiah. John invites the people to be baptized as a signal that they want to begin again, that they want to be forgiven and start fresh with God. And John makes it clear that the baptism that Jesus will usher in—the baptism we receive—is different, because Jesus is different, to put it mildly.

And then—right on cue—John baptizes Jesus. If you feel like some familiar details are missing, you're right. Mark does not write about shepherds or Mary or Joseph or even Bethlehem, nor does he record any conversation between John and Jesus. As we will see repeatedly in our time with Mark, this gospel moves with a driving, urgent pulse. Mark's favorite word is *immediately*. When the world around you is crumbling and things are precarious, *immediately* is one word that makes the utmost sense. So Mark tells us this beginning of the gospel comes not with a new bullet journal or a gym membership or shiny plastic bins from the Container Store but with an urgency fueled by the Holy Spirit.

And that Holy Spirit's entrance is not gentle or subtle. Unlike Matthew or Luke who speak of the heavens' being opened, Mark tells us that the heavens are torn apart. Torn. It's as disruptive as it sounds. It is not neat or pretty or tame, and right now as the world around us seems more fraught and precarious than it has in a while, I hear this as great good news.

Maurice Sendak published *Where the Wild Things Are* about five years before I was born. I don't remember reading it as a child, and I honestly wasn't too much of a fan when I was babysitting or even when my own child was born. For all of my impulsive playfulness, I have always gravitated toward happy endings and orderly stories. I like to stay on the right side of the rules and do as I'm told. Although a glance at my desk may

reveal something different, I like things to be tidy. I love a crisp clean calendar. I adore a freshly made bed with clean sheets. My heart flutters at a sparkling clean house. So a story about a wild little boy in a wolf suit who growls at his mother and runs off to the land of wild things after being sent to his room without supper would hardly be my ideal hero. And yet, as I revisited this passage from Mark, I was reminded yet again that the story that shapes our faith, the story that I adore exploring with you in bible study and preaching is not a Hallmark movie with neat and tidy hospital corners. This is no gentle gospel, soft and mild. It is instead a narrative in which characters, both human and divine run a bit wild.

In the first twenty verses of Mark, we hear about John, a wild and wooly prophet baptizing people not in a pristine marble font but on the banks of the muddy Jordan. This unruly character lives on a steady diet of bugs and wild honey. Then Jesus appears on the scene and the heavens are ripped apart, the voice of God speaks to Jesus and tells him that he is in fact God's beloved Son. Then the Holy Spirit rushes in and drives this Jesus deeper into the wilderness. There Mark tells us in passing that while Jesus is "among the wild beasts," he is tempted by Satan and tended by angels.

In Sendak's story, wild little Max is sent to his room with no supper after growling at his mother. From there he travels to the land of the wild things where he is unafraid of these monsters with big yellow eyes and terrible teeth. He tells them to stop and they stop. They decide he is the "most wild thing of all." And then Max declares, "Let the wild rumpus start," and they play and dance and swing from vines until Max once again tells them to stop. Then he heads back home where his dinner awaits him in his room, and it is still warm. Max, king of the wild things is not Jesus. He sends the poor beasts to bed without their supper, after all. He is beloved however, and in that supper we are reminded that in the midst of all the wildness, that belovedness remains.

Belovedness stands at the core of Jesus' story and ours. In Mark's gospel, those around Jesus do not hear God's voice at his baptism. Jesus does. And we do. And it is this central essential identity as God's beloved that drives Jesus into the battered human landscape, God's beloved world filled with brokenness, gnashing teeth, and far too many tears. Jesus will meet these wild things with wild notions of his own, notions of fierce

love in the face of hatred, determined servanthood in the face of power plays, and extravagant sacrifice in a grab-all-you can and fend-for-yourself world.

There is a meal waiting for us, too. In a moment we will gather once more for communion, the meal given to us and prepared for us in love. This meal is not tame, polite affair. This meal reminds us of that night long ago in an upper room where Jesus shared a meal with his friends ahead of his arrest. There he promised that the terrors that awaited him and them outside that room were not the end of the story. This meal reminds us of the unmatched sacrifice God makes in giving his son to show us his love face to face. And this meal points us to the wild, outlandish promise that we will sit at table with God's beloved from every age and every corner of creation in the kingdom of God.

As you leave worship today, you are invited to take a small piece of paper with you. (And if you are not with us here in the sanctuary, I am happy to send one to you if you call or email me here at the church.) The edges are torn and messy, and each one carries the same reminder that we are God's beloved. It is this promise, this outlandish assurance, that enables us to move back out into the world and into a New Year. For it is that beloved-ness that is central to who we are because of *whose* we are. In baptism we are marked as God's own. That is who we are, whether we are wearing a wolf suit or a faded pair of jeans or a soccer uniform or scrubs or a bathrobe or running shoes or work boots or stilettos. That is who we are, whether or not our desk stacked high with papers or our beds are neatly made with crisp hospital corners. Beloved is who we are, whether we are behind a desk, in a hospital bed, on the road, or in the classroom. We are God's beloved, whether we are weeping, growling, singing, or silent. We are God's beloved, disciples and followers of God's beloved Son, the One who walks among the wild beasts and stares down the powers that be and loves children and argues with religious leaders and gives his life to show us and everyone else that they are God's beloved, that we are God's beloved. Beloved is who we are no matter what the year holds, no matter what torn-up terrible-ness crosses our path. We are God's beloved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.