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Trinity Lutheran Church of Las Cruces
Lent 1 B February 18, 2018
Mark 1:9-15

Satan, Wild Beasts, and Angels.

Was Jesus bi-polar?

That's a question that caught my eye as I was browsing the internet conversation about today's Gospel text.

Looking at this story from Mark, we go to the height of energy and joy: It seems all of creation joins in a multi-media event announcing -- this man, Jesus -- is the beloved Son of God: the visuals are grand as the heavens are ripped open -- a wild bird flies down -- a voice is heard and a feeling is felt:

YOU Jesus, are loved, and God is proud of you.

Oh how many of us have longed for that kind of an affirmation, from Dad or Mom, from teacher, boss or coach, even from God - I want to hear it, don't you?

In his sermon for Ash Wednesday Pastor Wayne talked about the spiritual discipline of secrecy, and learning to do all things for an audience of ONE. The Bible certainly promotes this idea: As we just prayed together in the words of Psalm 25: 1-2 ***To you O Lord, I lift up my soul, O my God in YOU I trust!***

YOU, God, (singular YOU) are the only one who can measure right from wrong, good from evil, what is worthwhile and what is a waste of time.

For Jesus, the moment of his baptism was a moment of standing before his audience of the One Almighty God and underneath, all of God's creation: the rivers and rainbows sing for gladness, the dove zooms for joy overhead.

Some of you have surely had a similar experience, when you have felt all is right with the world and your place and direction in it is clear.

Such a moment reminds me of the words of, Julian of Norwich, a Christian mystic of the fourteenth century, who had a vision of God and afterwards she famously said,

"All will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing shall be well."

OR... (back to the bi-polar question)

is Jesus' River Jordan experience just the manic episode of a bi-polar life?

Where there is mania and joy,
darkness, depression, and fatigue are sure to follow.

Is that how it is?

Here is Jesus, at a sweet pinnacle of his life then, verse 12,

Immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. And there he was tested, tempted, harangued by Satan.

From the heights to the depths...

From
flowing waters, friendly voices, affirmation,

To dry land, loneliness, and accusation.
No food, no water, no shade, no voice of God to be heard.

Has an audience of ONE turned into an audience of NONE?

The Gospel of Mark doesn't go into details of the temptation,

But Satan's name means "the Accuser"

He is the one who is pointing his finger at you.

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Students of the Bible remember him well from his first appearance in a lush garden, at the beginning of the world, in Genesis.

There, Satan talks to Eve: "Did God really say you musn't eat any of the fruits of the garden?"

From beginning to end, Satan is always trying to get us to doubt God. To doubt God exists. To doubt God's goodness and power. To doubt God's will for LIFE - life well lived, here and now, eternal perfect life in the New Creation to come.

Oh Family of God,

What a terrible, tragic week it has been, one more time, in *our* beautiful garden, the United States of America.

And if Americans supposedly believe less and less in God, we have had our noses shoeved into the reality of *Satan's* existence.

Seventeen beautiful people, mowed down by young man with a gun, a man who had been tempted to believe the lie that life does not matter, that a human being can avenge anger with his own hands. That God doesn't exist, or at least, doesn't care.

While I believe Satan was working through this young man in Florida,

This gunman was not Satan.

He was and IS a human being, who gave in to the Satanic voices within and the Satanic systems around him, which allowed a clearly troubled man, too easy access to the means of innocent deaths.

In the bible, when we see Satan, we rarely, maybe never, see Satan as the *perpetrator* of violence. What we see, in God's Word, is Satan as the instigator, the one who says,

*See, there is no God.
 See, human beings are not precious.
 See, you have to take justice into your own hands.*

*See, there is no difference between good and evil.
 See, no difference between truth and half-truths.
 See, evil will always have the upper hand, so use your strength to grab what you
 can in this world... and if that doesn't work, then just
 curse God and die,*

That's the kind of thing Satan consistently says, we have to learn to recognize this voice.

Such an irony that this horror at a high school happened on Valentine's Day, maybe no where in the world is Valentine's Day more anticipated and appreciated than on an American high school campus, what gifts of love were planned for that day?

And, it was Ash Wednesday. Many of you saw the photo of a beautiful woman at the scene of the shooting, maybe she's a mom, maybe a teacher, a big ash cross on her forehead, her eyes in anguish as she cradles another woman, whose face is scrunched up with wailing, you can almost hear her wailing, just by looking at that picture.

Whatever you may believe politically and practically about this shooting (and it's important that we pay attention – to see what the truth is and then, as a Christian, to take action to help contain this kind of evil: prayer & action, prayer and action, always goes hand in hand for Christians)

...

I think one thing on which Christians and students of the Bible can all agree,

Satan is alive and at work in the universe, and must be actively contained and resisted.

This is the other side of Jesus' sometimes almost bi-polar existence as a human being on this earth.

Jesus is tempted, taunted in the wilderness for 40 days.

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Tempted into unbelief, tempted to misuse power for himself, tempted to think God had no direction and purpose for life on Earth.

Tempted to focus only on himself.

Did the wild beasts help or hinder Satan's attack? There's a reason the wild animals are mentioned in the story but I'm not sure why... did a hyena chasing down a deer, maybe make Jesus think about the violence and futility of life,

Or instead did a soaring eagle, remind him of the words of Isaiah 40:31

...those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles

And did the wild beasts maybe usher in those angels. Because if Satan is alive and at work, we also are forcefully reminded from Mark 1: 13, that the angels *also* came to Jesus in that wilderness; angels, God's messengers and agents, ministered to Jesus, surely reminding him of his Audience of One by saying something very much like 14 centuries later, Saint Julian of Norwich would say – Julian of Norwich who herself had witnessed three rounds of the black plague, a horrible death involving tumors as big as apples, black fever spots, vomiting of blood.

The black plague killed nearly everyone in her family, and most of her community; Julian of Norwich who had suffered extreme personal pain – physical and spiritual... and yet she had a vision of the crucified Christ, the agony he endured on the cross for us. And because of this Suffering Christ, Julian could say:

"All will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing shall be well."

People of God. Today's Gospel of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, struggling against Satan, observing the wild beasts, and ministered to by angels,

Is a testimony to us:

God has a will and purpose for our lives.

God doesn't want us to ignore evil, but instead, God equips us in practical ways to resist Satan and the power of evil in all its forms, including apathy, self-centeredness, and despair, and instead, God calls us forth to be agents of LIFE for our community, with Jesus, for Jesus, and only because of Jesus.

Who is not bi-polar, by the way, except insofar as he is with us through all the bi-polarities of life itself: highs and lows, the temptations and the also the triumphs of our lives.

As he will be with us in the final triumph of the Life to come.

Amen.