

Psalm 25:1-10
Mark 1:9-15

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DRIVEN

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.
And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. *Mark 1:11-12*

On the way into church the other day I noticed a little trio of people at the end of their driveway on Devon State Road. There was a mom with a great hooded winter coat bundled up against the cold. Next to her a diminutive pre-schooler, equally swaddled against the wintry elements, with a book bag the size of a parachute pack. Standing over him, beaming down with kindly animated face and gestures, was an older man, I guessed the grandfather. And at the sight of that little trio my heart began to dance to thoughts of future days.

By the time I reached Cumberland Farms to get my coffee, in my imagination I was lying in the back yard one summer's night on a blanket with grandson or granddaughter, staring up at an ink-black sky, arm and finger extended on a trajectory from grandchild to where darkness and that little eye together discovered the stars: the Big Dipper, the great arc from the dipper's handle to bright Arcturus, Cassiopeia, Orion and nearby Sirius, the "dog star," brightest in the sky. "And look, if you follow the line from the outer edge of the pan of the Big Dipper to . . . see it, a bit bluer than others . . . *there!* The north star, Polaris! And you know what—It never moves, it's always there pointing us to the north, and everything rolls around it every night like a giant pinwheel. Sailors have looked for it for hundreds of years to find their way safely home."

Then I imagine sitting with my grandchild on a bench outside the Black Bull Inn in Coniston, in my beloved English Lake District, looking up at Coniston Old Man, the mountain that looms protectively over the lakeside village. "Look at the mountain," I'd say with a wink, "what do you see?" She (or he) would squint a bit, knowing by now that granddad likely wants her to look very carefully. "Do you see any patterns?" I'd ask. More intense searching, and then that lovely epiphany of discovery.

"Granddad—swirls and lines in the rock, like grandmother's layer cake." And so it would go.

Some time days or years later, Mom would call, or take her by the hand and say. "Honey. I have to tell you something really hard. Granddad died last night." It happens, doesn't it. Life, without warning takes wrenching turns. And where do we go to keep whole to get through them? How do we survive bitter loss and disappointment?

If I had been telling Mark's story of Jesus' baptism I might have wanted to emphasize the dove part. It's so sublime, a holy anointing, heaven and earth conjoined in a perfect credentialing of Jesus. Jesus would then take off with his family and friends, enjoy the moment, say his farewells over a long weekend, then go off to the wilderness, that solitude of a seminary, to prepare for his ministry, alone. Or if not the dove, I'd spend more time on the temptation part, the way Matthew and Luke do in their gospel versions. *Temptation*, now there's something we can all relate to. Yet Mark doesn't dwell on either. The same Spirit that anointed him at his baptism in an instant drives him without pause into the desert, a place intimate with God, but also with that arid aloneness that makes us so very solitary and vulnerable.

Life at its hardest hits us like a sledge hammer, if not from the sublime at least from the meandering commonplace when the roof suddenly falls in. When the oncologist says the cancer is back and it's spreading. When a child falls critically ill. When someone pulls out from a slow lane into yours without seeing you. When your boss tells you on a cheery spring day that your position is terminated, immediately. When someone steals your identity. When your spouse admits to an affair. When your child gets expelled from school. Where do you go when things get that rough, really rough? Whom do you talk to? Is it difficult for many of you men, in particular, to really open up with someone, perhaps because it's not cool, or you're not secure enough in the relationship to talk with another. How do you cope, men, women, young, old, when life hurls you bodily into the wilderness?

When Jesus was driven into the wilderness so suddenly, it was by the same dovelike Spirit that had just anointed him. If you've ever been in a room with a wild bird let loose, you can imagine the feeling. Eduard Schweizer notes something very interesting here, that the Hebrew letters for the word "the presence of God" coincidentally also mean "that which is like a dove." Can you capture the sense of urgency, imagine that bird flailing at Jesus' head and shoulders, driving him into the desert to a solitary confrontation of God and with his very human, very vulnerable self. And because the stress of giving up something cherished—family, life as you know it, relationships, health—is so hard, Mark reminds that we are never abandoned, that the angels, that is the messengers of God ministered to him. The greater the need and the faithfulness, the greater the ministrations of the grace of God.

When we call someone an angel we speak accurately. Angels are people God puts in our way, often unbeknown to them, to effect some purpose. Yesterday, on my way to the Farmer's Market to get a hoagie, I turned on NPR as Terri Gross was interviewing two leaders of ARC. ARC stands for Addicts Rehabilitative Center. It was founded in Harlem in 1967 by James Allen, a recovering cocaine addict. They found an abandoned building which the owners gave to them. But the building, they discovered, had an outstanding mortgage of just over \$100,000. Somehow they made it till 1970 when, figuratively speaking—the roof caved in, and it all came due right as they ran out of funds. And with no credit, they faced eviction and the closing of ARC. James Allen decided they'd have to quit, but his wife had a better idea: pray to God. He did. The next day Allen met Curtis Lundy, another struggling addict and a very fine jazz musician. Lundy said he had an idea to start a choir of the addicts in the program. They took their music into churches around Harlem and New York City, and the offerings they generated saved ARC.

But Allen had noticed that Curtis Lundy was using his superb musicianship as a "badge of distinction," as he called it, behind which to hide. He wasn't addressing his real addiction. So Curtis made Lundy agree to a pact, if his leadership of the choir was to continue. He was not to touch his beloved double base for six months so as to get from behind his music and come to terms with his real self, and get clean. Not only did Lundy come to terms with himself and find redemption, he probably also saved the organization. ARC holds God at the center of its rehabilitation. It knows something about life—that everyone needs help, not just addicts. Their only difference is that they discover the need more urgently.

In *Preaching about the Needs of Real People*, David H. C. Read writes,

I find only one barrier that shuts us off from access to [God's] love. It's not our disabilities, not our heritage, not our loneliness, not our agnosticism, not our sexuality, not our misfortunes, not even our sins, it is simply the refusal to admit that we are in need.

Where do you go when you're in real need? Reed adds,

What Jesus offered, and goes on offering is access to the liberating love of God for every one of us who is willing to admit our need. The point is, that we are all disabled."

Which is what makes God's universal offer of companionship through the hard times so stunning. God's angels visiting unawares.

Is it really so hard to ask for help? Trust God in all things. Ask for God's help in all things. As Phoebe Perkins puts it:

. . . rather than going looking for our own insurance policies. Excessive anxiety about our own success and security often leads to compromises with our religious values and personal well-being.

We, too, are driven. Likely more often by our own decisions and "solutions." Meanwhile, that lovely peace, that dove-like benediction, that we have all experienced when we have asked God, does not alight. Yet all the while, there for the asking is that gift of grace, waiting. As John Keble sublimely puts it, "hovering around us while we pray."

Amen.