

“Wilderness Wrestling”
Exodus 3:1-6; 1 Kings 19:2-8
Mark 1:9-13
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I usually avoid difficult and dangerous things.

I work to make things simpler, and safer for myself and for Nancy.

I think that my behavior in this regard is fairly normal.

I know other people who would say they do the same.

Why not go with simple and safe - - instead of difficult and dangerous?

Unless - - there is some reason to do otherwise...

What reason would there be - - to go with the dangerous and the difficult?

Well - - the Bible readings about angels - - help answer that question.

Angels appeared to people in the wilderness at difficult times, over and over.

And so this morning, that is our starting point.

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the Biblical accounts of angelic appearances. / Most people are familiar with the fact that the stories of the birth of Jesus include angelic appearances. / But as we saw on December 27, there are a number of other BIRTH stories that include angels. / According to the Bible, Jesus was not the only one - - who was born - - accompanied by an angel.

Then last week, we read about angels that bring judgment. / In the early life of Jesus this was what happened around his encounter with king Herod. / But we also saw that in the Old Testament, angels brought judgment on a number of kings - - and that corruption and the abuse of others often brings - - angelic judgment.

This week - - we journey into the wilderness.

In the wilderness, angels appear to several key people in the Bible. / In fact so much so that you might suggest that if you WANTED to encounter an angel - - you should go to the wilderness. / Except - - if you did - - it might be a difficult journey - - and it might be dangerous. / So there is ONE REASON - - to go with difficult and dangerous - - instead of safe and simple: to encounter an angel.

But is that REALLY what you want?

What we have seen - - and are seeing again today - - is - - that angelic encounters are often frightening - - and usually come in difficult circumstances - - and with judgment for any wrongdoing. / Today - - we encounter angels in the wilderness - - and they are associated with words of calling to various people who were messengers for God.

God's call - - often comes with some wilderness experience.

So it may NOT be simple nor safe.

And you might want to try to avoid it.

Except that the thing about a calling from God - - is - - it's pretty difficult to avoid!

Most of the people in the Bible who experienced a call from God TRIED to avoid it - - and in the end - - they could not.

No matter HOW dangerous - - and no matter how difficult - - it was just too important.

So maybe one question for us is: what is THAT important to us?

What are you willing to risk - - danger - - and difficulty - - in order to achieve?

While you think about that - - let me give you an image to set next to your thoughts.

This image comes from an old Aesop's Fable.

Aesop was a sixth century philosopher and story teller.

So this is a pretty old image. / It has lasted a long time.

It's not as old as the Bible, but it is close!

This Aesop's fable is called: "The Boy and the Nettles"

Before I tell you Aesop's story, a little background on nettles:

Nettles are plants that grow in the wilderness and forests and have little stinging hairs on their leaves. / The hairs can sting you and cause itching and a rash. / But if you are careful and know how to do it, you can pick the leaves. / And the plants are often used to make medicines.

So these plants are dangerous - - difficult to pick - - but potentially a source of healing.

Aesop's old story goes like this:

A boy was gathering berries from a hedge when his hand was stung by a nettle. / Smarting and in pain, he ran to tell his mother. / In between his sobs and crying he said to her: "I only touched them ever so lightly, mother." / To which his mother replied: "That is just why you got stung, my son." / Said she, "If you had grasped the plant firmly it wouldn't have hurt you in the least".

Sometimes, it seems, we just have to grab hold of the dangerous and the difficult.

And there may even be a reward when we do.

Which is the nature of several of these stories about a calling from God in the Bible.

Let's look at each one, starting in the Old Testament...

In Exodus chapter 3, we read about the calling of Moses by God. / Moses had run away from Egypt because his temper had gotten out of control when he saw how badly the Hebrew slaves were treated - - and so he had killed a guard. / Now in the wilderness - - on the run - - an angel appears to him in a burning bush. / The angel told him that he needed to return and face the danger - - in order to confront the corrupt Pharaoh and help his people go free.

It would be dangerous and difficult.

But it was his mission and his calling - - and so it was worth it.

Later, the prophet Elijah is also on the run. / He had gotten some more royalty angry by pointing out their corruption - - and fighting for the Hebrew people - - and so his life was in danger. / In a cave in the wilderness - - an angel appeared to him and called him back.

The account of this angelic encounter with Elijah is in the book of 1 Kings.

If you go WAY back - - before either Elijah OR Moses - - all the way back to Jacob in the book of Genesis chapter 32 - - Jacob wrestled with an angel in the wilderness - - and it changed his life. / It was such a difficult experience that he was injured - - and never fully healed. / But that angelic encounter - - set the course for the rest of his life.

All of these encounters with angels in the wilderness - - set the stage for Jesus.

At the beginning of his ministry - - after his baptism - - Jesus encounters an angel.

He is in the wilderness.

And there are even wild beasts out there - - according to Mark's gospel.

But an angel appeared - - and ministered to Jesus.

I can tell you this much:

I'm glad that Jesus didn't say, "It's too dangerous and too difficult"

Imagine if Jacob, and Moses, and Elijah and Jesus had gone for the simple and the safe!

Each one of them - - faced danger and difficulty.

And each one of them - - experienced an angelic messenger from God.

An angel IN THE MIDST OF - - the anger.

An angel in the midst of the difficulty.

And each one of them - - said "yes" to the danger.

And here we are.

Like the boy learned about nettles, we learn from these ancestors in faith.

Each of them - - grasped hold firmly to the nettles.

Each of them faced danger and difficulty.

So when we are in a similar situation - - we don't have to face it alone.

We can face our difficulties - - with Jesus by our side.

But...

What exactly does it mean - - to face the difficulties in life with Jesus by our side?

In Mark's gospel, an angel was by Jesus side.

And just before that angel appeared in the wilderness, God called Jesus "beloved".

It was at Jesus baptism that God said, "beloved".

So it seems to me that when we are facing something difficult we can remember:

"We are beloved of God"

When we feel like we're drowning - - we can remember we are God's beloved child.

Knowing that you are loved by God does NOT make life simpler.

Knowing you are loved by God does NOT make it safer.

But it DOES change things.

At least I think it does.

Imagine yourself in the wilderness.

Or in some wilderness of fear, doubt, or decision.

If you have ever been afraid, or had to make a decision, think of that.

If you have ever been lost, think of that.

If you have ever been so angry and upset you couldn't think clearly, think of that.

Now listen...

God's voice from heaven, spoken to Jesus in the wilderness at his baptism, is for you:

“Beloved”

God called Jesus beloved, and the angel in the wilderness ministered to Jesus.

We are God's beloved children!

And sometimes that means we are led to wrestle with life.

Sometimes that means we have to take on some big fight.

Sometimes that means we have to tell the truth to someone.

Sometimes that means we have to disagree with someone.

But that is part of the calling, to follow Jesus.

That is the wilderness - - where angels appear.

And in that wilderness - - angels not only judge - - but they minister.

May it be so - - for you and for me.

Amen