

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Facing Wild Beasts First Sunday of Lent/B February 22, 2015 12:15 PM Gn 9:8-15; 1 Pt 3:18-22; **Mk 1:12-15** (Repent, grow up, become an adult, choose the will of God, and believe in the goodness of it all.)

“He was among the beasts, and the angels ministered to him.”

I believe sometimes we paint an unreal picture of Jesus or the saints in our own minds; then we figure they are not relevant to our lives, they were so different. Mark wants us to know that **Jesus was tempted**, sorely tempted, **as we are, and that he experienced the same feelings we do**. “He was among the wild beasts.” **The wild beasts** are not animals; that refers to **the emotions and the passions that are in everybody**, that can be the motivation of great evil, that can be very dark. **Jesus had to face his potential for evil, and he was free to reject the will of God**. If he were not free to do that, his work would not have been beneficial.

So he already begins at the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel; he is baptized and he is led to the desert by the Spirit to be tempted because this is what is going to help him choose. **We can’t choose unless we are tempted**. So this is the occasion in which he is going to choose to follow the will of the Father. And in that direction, on that tangent, he has to deal with his **dark side so that passions and emotions** are not going to erupt unexpectedly. **He has to expect them and so do all of us**. We have to prepare for our lives. This is what Jesus is doing in the desert; he is preparing for what comes later. He is right now dealing with the anger and the frustration and the bitterness that will come because of his rejection by the vast majority of people. Do you think that felt good? But he learned how to deal with these feelings. **He dealt with the fear of death** that, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, kept the world in bondage. He deals with it here. He deals with it later also again in the garden of Gethsemane. **It’s not as if you deal with this once and for all. We need to revisit from time to time the desert**. Right now he is making a choice to be an adult Son of God. We all have to choose to be adults. We do not grow up willy-nilly—physically, yes, not morally, not spiritually. **We have to decide to be an adult child of God**. We always remain a child of God. We don’t become adults until we choose to. **We have to embrace the will of the Father**. That’s what adulthood is about in the spiritual life.

Now in this gospel context **the word for growing up is called repentance**; it means not acting naturally, not just following the way of least resistance, not simply doing what is comfortable or pleasing. **It means doing something very deliberately that may even be painful, but good.** We are created good by God, but we do tend to be self-centered. Children tend to be self-centered. We tend to care about our own survival. It's actually instinctive. And that's not bad, but there's something better. **There is something better than our self-will.** There is something better than our self-importance. There is something better than our self-preservation. **That is the will of God.** And repentance is choosing the will of God. So Jesus, at this very early part of his mission saw already that even his own human life was not the greatest goal for his will, or the greatest choice, or the greatest good he could choose. There was something better. What was it? **Trusting in the Father, seeking to do what is right and letting the Father take care of all the results.** Now that's courage. It's more than courage; it's actually all the virtues. **It's courage and it's prudence and it's temperate, and it's just and it's everything.** And so he went forth from this place **preaching**, exactly that: **repent, grow up, become an adult, choose the will of God, and believe in the goodness of it all—** and believe in the goodness of it all. That's the good news.

So **Lent** for us is the same thing. It's a time for us to **retire to our desert spot.** It's a time to reflect on who we are becoming, and ask God for guidance about who we might yet become. How perhaps might our journey be slightly altered for the better, recalibrated as they say in computer language? Believing begins by **choosing God's standards for happiness** rather than the world's standards, which we are more or less born into. The world doesn't know what makes anybody happy, and many people around us, most people around us, are pursuing short-term goals. And they are lucky if they are good for the short-term. **God alone knows what's good in the long-term, if I dare say the eternal term.** And God alone knows what life is about and what it means because he is the Creator of it. Believing begins when we choose God's standards and God's meaning and live by that. And so it goes beyond the world and its short-term goals and it chooses the standards and the goals embodied in **Jesus, who is God's model for us of what originally was intended for human life. In him the wild beasts did not have the last word.**