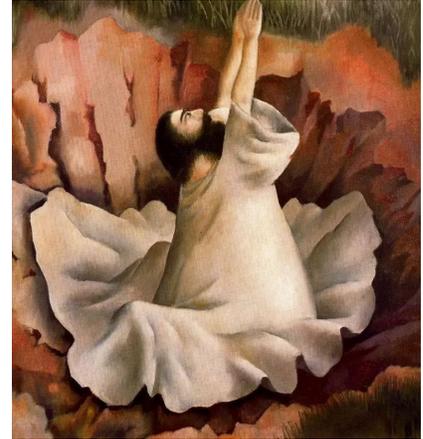


Sunday, February 17, 2018
First Sunday in Lent
Lake Jackson United Methodist Church
Pastor Jill Berquist



Scripture: Mark 1:9-15
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;¹²with you I am well pleased."

The Temptation of Jesus

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news¹⁵ of God,¹⁶ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;¹⁷ repent, and believe in the good news."¹⁸

Ritual:

Pianist will play while the Bishop's Statement is read. Then the choir will sing "Abide With Me." Between verses, names of the victims will be read. During the last verse, the 14 purple candles for students and the 3 white candles for staff will be light.

Sermon: Where the Wild Things Are



Disclaimer: Some of you may not be comfortable with the message this morning. Some of you may disagree with me. That's okay. Come back next week for a different message. But when I conferenced with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee when I took this appointment, I promised them I would always speak the Truth as I understand it before this congregation, and not censure myself so I don't get myself in political hot water. So here we are. As John Wesley said, "*May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without a doubt, we may. Herein, all children of God may unite; they may forward one another in love and good works.*"

Now, I'd like to start with a story.

The night Max wore his wolf suit, begins the famous children's book by Maurice Sendak, The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another, his mother called him, "WILD THING!" and Max said, "I'LL EAT YOU UP!" so he was sent to bed without eating anything. That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines, and the walls became the world all around, and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max, and he sailed off through night and day, and in and out of weeks, and almost over a year to where the wild things are. And when he came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said, "BE STILL!" and he tamed them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once, and they were frightened, and called him the most wild thing of all, and made him king of all wild things. "And now," cried Max, "let the wild rumpus start!"

The rest of that story book ends quite happily, with Max befriending the wild beasts and romping with them until he misses his mommy, and then coming out of his own silly imagination to have a nice home-cooked supper—it was still hot--and hug time with his parents.

Wednesday afternoon, in a tame, quiet, not-wild-at-all town in South Florida, did not end with supper and hugs for 14 high school students and 3 staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. In their story, the wild beast they met won the day. Evil triumphed.



I had just taken attendance in my 7th period class a few hundred miles away, at Marianna High, where I teach English to seniors, when I glanced at my phone. An alert was flashing across it. I don't usually read the news out loud to my students (we discourage cell phone peeking), but this one, yes. "There's a shooting underway in a high school in Florida. Right now," I said to my class. And we turned on CNN and together watched live footage unfold as students and teachers **just like us** covered in classrooms and hid in closets and texted their goodbyes and watched their friends bleed out in front of them. When our bell rang, signaling the end of the school day, the killer was still on the loose, and the fate of those students was still unknown.

We had just practiced for this last week. Did you hear that? *We practice for this.* Along with fire drills and tornado huddles, we practice, several times a semester, hiding in closets, locking doors, being quiet, and listening for codes. I talked with our former pastor, Nick Quinton this week, and he told me that he was on his way to pick John Robert up from kindergarten early, because they had just had an active shooter drill, and it made his tummy hurt. Now, there are the standard procedures, and then there are the non-standard practices we all discuss with our students: Stand with your feet on the toilet if you're in the bathroom when it happens. We can all get out the windows, but then there's a fence to scale to get away, so figure out if you can climb it before you go. Some of you can grab that step ladder and climb the file cabinets and go up into the attic through the ceiling tiles—there are cat walks up there, and you'll be safe—unless there's a bomb. Help me upend my desk and push it against the door to block access, and then pile the rest of your desks in front of it to make it more difficult to get in. Maybe he'll leave us alone and go to a classroom up the hall. Turn on my teapot so you'll have scalding water. Does everyone know how to make a tourniquet? Throw your laptops at his head.

My friends, this is INSANE.

Last Wednesday was insane.

There have been 208 school shootings since Columbine in 1999. That's insane. Oh, I know, those shooters had mental health problems. But so does a nation—OUR NATION—have mental health problems, so



are we insane, when school children are dying and we are literally doing NOTHING to stop the slaughter.

And this is the judgment, says the Apostle John in his gospel, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.

Jesus grieves, not only the loss of innocent victims of the world's violence, but at the lack of action on the part of God's people to care for those who cannot take care of themselves. He says, in the Gospel of Matthew, "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to **gather your children together** as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and **you were not willing!***"

The Psalmist admonishes us to "*Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and **pursue it.***"

Do. Seek. Pursue. Gather. Those are action verbs. These scriptures aren't telling us sit around and wait for a miracle when we see evil. We're not told to wait for rescue or Divine Intervention. God is calling us to **action**. Consider how active we are in the beautiful vision of the prophets Micah and Isaiah of the Peaceable Kingdom:

*They shall beat their **swords into ploughshares**, and their spears into pruninghooks; neither shall they learn war any more.*

Which brings me to this week's scripture. It's the first week of Lent, and the lectionary always likes us to start out Lent by following Jesus into the wilderness. Hear again the few short lines we will concentrate on this morning:

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Once again, in the Gospel of Mark, things are happening **immediately**. Jesus had just been through a high, holy moment in his life—his baptism and God's pronouncement from the sky that he is the son of God—but Jesus gets no time to enjoy the moment, or to relax in it. His



blue sash and shining white robe aren't even dry when the Spirit IMMEDIATELY drives him out into the desert to meet evil. Notice that Jesus didn't really get to choose to go out into the wilderness. He didn't decide to take some time apart, to fast and to pray, to exercise his powers and to hone his skills at confronting evil, or to wait for God to give him a clear sign. It's just that suddenly, there he is. In the wilderness. With Satan and the beasts.

Remember, the writer of Mark was convinced that the end times were very near-- he was very convinced that the world would end in his lifetime. He reports on the immediacy of Jesus's actions because he felt a sense of urgency about salvation. If the world was ending, he wanted to be sure as many people as possible heard the good news and were saved before that happened.

The next part of our focus scripture is our prescription for that salvation--it's the part that tells us what we should do about all of this. Jesus models the Way.

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts." Other gospels give us more detail, tell us about the temptations, tell us Jesus prayed, round out the story. Not Mark. He just tells us that Jesus was there, being tempted by Satan, and facing down those beasts. This is not the first time in our study of the Gospel of Mark we have seen Jesus move straight towards evil and confront it. In fact, throughout this gospel, Jesus will confront demons, and sickness, and oppression, and injustice. He does it often enough that I think it's safe to assume we, too, are called to stare down the wild things.

I'm reminded again of that lesson from Micah and Isaiah. The order of that scripture is very deliberate. This prophecy is not about God rescuing us—it is about **human action**. Micah tells us to be part of bringing the peaceable kingdom. When we confront evil, when we BEAT the swords and turn them into farming instruments—when we change instruments that bring death into instruments that cultivate life—when we take part in our own transformation and the transformation of our world—THEN God ushers in the peaceable kingdom. When we turn from evil and PURSUE peace, says the Psalmist, then we can lie down in green pastures.



I want to share with you what I think is a modern-day interpretation of the Peaceable Kingdom. It's a vision of our public schools. I stumbled on it on facebook yesterday, and then was overwhelmed to discover that it had been written by my own little sister, Linnie. Linnie is a 1st grade teacher in an impoverished, underfunded, overcrowded school on the outskirts of inner city Detroit. Her post was responding to something she sees often on social media, and I share with you because it gives us a clear picture of what we are fighting for.

To those people stating mass shootings occur because God has been taken out of schools:

If you do not see God in schools today, you are not looking very hard.

I see God every day, all day.

God is in the child who patiently helps another student practice reading.

God is in the teacher who spends his own money to buy a student a coat.

God is in the child who cries because another child is hurt.

God is in the student who willingly shares her brand new crayons because another student admires them.

God is in the administrator who never eats because there are so many students needing attention.

God is in the school worker who organizes a sock drive because many students don't have socks.

God is in the union (yes, union) that collects health care items for the neighborhood.

God is in the teacher who can't sleep for countless nights due to worrying about a student.

God is in the parent that buys supplies for the classroom because not everyone can afford them.

God is in the school worker that makes house visits and phone calls well into the night to connect with families.

God is in the parent that volunteers to head up a committee to promote after school activities.

God is in the teacher that gives her colleague a hug after a rough day.

God is in the child that can't concentrate in class until he makes sure his sister is okay in her class.

God is in the noon aides that purchase mittens and gloves so students can go outside for recess.



God is in the child writing love notes of appreciation.

God is in the children who are so excited to see a student return to school after an illness.

God is in the teacher's assistant that spends countless, underpaid hours working because she wants and needs to help kids.

God is in the school employee that gives a child lunch money.

And God is in this teacher's 81 year old mother, who volunteers in her classroom every Monday, and whose sole ministry is to take troubled kids on walks around the school, just so they feel special.

God is listening to the many, many prayers said throughout the day by students, administrators, school workers, teachers, parents and community members.

*This was what I saw yesterday. One day.
I see God.*

So, there you have it. That's it. That's what we're fighting for. That's the safe sanctuary, the loving space, the community of caring that our children deserve. It's the Peaceable Kingdom that could be, should be, will be, for every child in this nation. But first, we must confront the evil that threatens to take that security from those children—many of whom know no other safe spaces in their lives. We have to confront the evil that is taking those children from us.

Because our children are dying, and our elected officials act as if they are powerless to do anything about it. And our citizens light candles and watch news footage and shake our heads and pray, and then we wait for the next time.

Well, I don't know about you, but I feel the Spirit driving me out into the wilderness on this one.

In fact, I think we are there right now. I think we are as much in the wilderness, and face with as much evil, as the people of the United States of America can possibly bear: **The mass murders of our children.** And I don't know about you, but I'm feeling that same immediacy, that same urgency as Mark. Unless we stop it, the end will not cease coming. Children will not be saved.



So, I'm finding myself right out into the wilderness where the Wild Beasts are.

Remember Max, the little boy who went Where the Wild Things Are? Remember how he won out over evil? *When he came to the place where the wild things are, they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said, "BE STILL!" and he tamed them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once.*

Without blinking once. And so, let's **confront** this wild thing that is happening in our country. Our Bishop, Kenneth Carter, of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, sent all the clergy in the conference a letter this week. He urged us to take up this cause in our services this week. He reminded us that United Methodist students, from our conference, were in those buildings when the shooter opened fire, and that the United Methodist Churches in the area are grieving and ministering to families and kids. And our Bishop has called for action.

So, at his suggestion, I offer to you envelopes and addresses, and a copy of #3428 from the **United Methodist Book of Resolutions**, "Our Call to End Gun Violence." The Resolution, passed by General Conference in 2016, is a bit outdated now, because it was written before the latest trend in school shootings—that of using the AR-15 to fire up to 90-135 rounds per minute. But the resolution does address a variety of demands that you can choose to write about and adopt into your personal practices—from prayer and partnering with victims and other faith communities, to insisting on universal background checks, to ensuring greater access to services for those suffering from mental illnesses, to safeguarding our own guns and practicing gun safety, to displaying signs in our churches saying we are a gun-free zone, and yes, YES! To banning large-capacity ammunition magazines and weapons. Maybe all of these are not your thing, but please, do something. If all of these are used together, we can truly bring about peace.

And so I offer you these tools. This is, of course, an invitation, not a requirement. But consider, at least, taking these things home, and making them your own. Read the resolution and the suggestions, and turn on your televisions and listen to the pleas of our school students, who are addressing our nation, and then decide what you believe and what you



want to write about, if you decide you want to write. And then use your pen to confront the beasts. Our bishop's goal is that next week, there are 5,000 letters on the altars of the churches spread across the Florida Conference. We will bundle all of ours together, and mail them with the return address: From the People of Lake Jackson United Methodist Church.

My friends, I'm afraid that prayer and candlelight vigils are not enough. It's time to pull a Mark, and act **immediately. Beat those swords** with the prophets. **Pursue peace** with the Psalms. **Gather our children** with Jesus. **Let the light shine in the darkness** with John. And to trust that **those angels** who were with Jesus in the wilderness will guide and guard and protect us, and our nation's children, in the doing.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. We are called to be the church. To seek justice and resist evil.*

Oh—and let the wild rumpus start!

Amen and amen.

* From the Creed of the United Church of Canada, used as the Affirmation of Faith earlier in the service