

## SERMON: “We Shall Not Want”

First United Church, Waterloo – LENT I -- Sunday, February 21, 2021

*PRAYER: “Let your Word flow into us, O God, like fresh filtered water. Let it fill us with your sustaining power. Let it quench our spiritual thirst. Let it well up within us that we might sense the abundance and newness of life that is ours in Jesus, the Christ. We pray in his name. Amen”*

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In a small town near where I live there’s a restaurant called “Tasty Bites”. There are probably other small North American towns with restaurants bearing the same name. That’s how I view the Gospel of Mark: serving upon serving of tasty bites of the life of Jesus. Right at the start we get a little opening glass of sparkling water, followed by a baked potato-skin account of the ministry of John the Baptist. Then, kind of one of those square little cocktail sandwiches, dyed with food colouring, where, between a top yellow bread slice highlighting John’s baptism of Jesus and a bottom green bread slice about Jesus initial foray into ministry in Galilee, we get this cream cheese and onion filler:

*“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.*

*He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;*

*and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1:13)*

If you want the whole corned beef or pastrami sandwich version of the temptation of Jesus, you need to nibble on either Matthew’s or Luke’s account.

Mark’s version is substantial enough.

Here we have Mark’s favourite adverb “immediately” emanating with electric shock around the activity of God’s Holy Spirit a second time, as it **drives** (a strong verb) Jesus into the wilderness.

The first emanation happened as Jesus rose from the baptismal water and the heavens split open to discharge that Spirit to supercharge Jesus.

In that wilderness, the in-Spirited Jesus gets tempted, or tested, by Satan, the heavyweight counterforce to God. It’s a forty-day and forty-night endurance test.

*“And he was with the wild beasts.”* Mark is the only gospel that inserts that detail.

I wonder what that’s about? Most commentators suggest it adds two accents.

One, it accentuates that Jesus was alone in that desolate and vulnerable place.

There are no other humans around; just desert creatures: lions, jackals, reptiles.

Secondly, that he was “with” those beasts

suggests that they did him no harm, nor did he harm them.

The Spirit resident in and around Jesus creates a force field of non-violence.

Jesus, in the flesh, was alone in that wilderness, but not without other company:

*“And the angels waited on him.”* In other translations “*ministered unto him*”.

The Greek verb used is “*diekonoun*”; the word from which we get the English word “*deacon*”.

It has to do with service. It’s in the imperfect tense, meaning that service was continual.

That suggests that angels somehow ensured Jesus had enough to eat, stayed protected, was kept warm, and found the requisite inner strength to resist Satan's seductions. It's a little sandwich of a story buttered in myth and legend, but it points to and highlights the reliability and richness of a sustained connection with God. In that time and place of threat, desolation, and isolation Jesus is cared for and provided for. In what might appear to be utter scarcity, he has abundance. I wonder if the experiential faith of the Psalmist came to his mind: *"The Holy God is my shepherd. I shall not want"*. Even without green pastures, he could find rest. We can imagine there were some still waters of some kind, so he could slake his thirst. He was fortified by the Spirit to hold fast to the ways of righteousness, repelling all of Satan's temptations, outwitting that devil in every test. In his forty-day sojourn in something like a valley of death, he had more faith than fear. It was like he knew he could lean on God for comfort and support, as if he had his hands on God's own rod and staff. There was somehow enough on the table for him to eat in the presence of his enemies. His cup, from which he received what he needed to sustain life, overflowed. Goodness and mercy attended him through the ministrations of angels.

He came out of that experience fortified and charged up to launch and undertake his ministry, to make it known and palpable that the realm of God is near, near at hand. That's a realm where wholeness of life and fullness of life can be sought out, tasted, created, received, shared with others: justice, peace, true community made possible for all and for all creation. Remember how he would summarize and phrase it in the midst of his ministry according to John: *"I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10) "They" are all those who listen to his words, believe them, live them. "They" are (remember the image?) like sheep who hear the voice, trust, and follow the shepherd. Matthew has Jesus say something similar in a different way. Luke also copies it: *"Do not be anxious about your life (what you will eat, or drink, or wear); seek first the realm of God and God's righteousness and all these things will be yours as well."* (cf. Matthew 6:25-33; Luke 12:22-31) *"The Holy God is my shepherd. I shall not want."* Not ever. That's the God Jesus knew. That's the God Jesus revealed and shared. That's the extravagant, ever-generous God of self-giving that generates fullness of life.

I wonder, is that the God we know and rely on?  
Is that the God we worship and honour at First United, Waterloo?  
I believe so. Insofar as we believe so we are free to live so.  
We shall not want.  
That means we get to live our lives and our faith in a context of abundance.

That means that as a community of faith we operate within the sphere of God's abundance. As we sustain, strengthen, and deepen our connection to God we will find and have all we need to support our ministry and mission. Even in a time of crisis, isolation, social distancing, we shall not want. Even if the spectres of scarcity hover around our financial and people resources, sustained, activated faith in God will prove them false through the lived truth of our abundance. And the sceptical influxes of naivety, pipe-dreaming, and doubt will also disintegrate. This is not mere perception or theory. This is lived experience. We are blessed offspring of Abraham and Sarah, called and destined to be a blessing to others. We are beloved children of God as Jesus was God's Beloved child. By faith, we are living into our new life "in Christ". It's what Rose Ann was reflecting on last Sunday as our "*theopoesis*", our becoming divine, our imaging God. That's about being and becoming embodied, incarnate words of God, as Jesus was the incarnate Word of God. A Word of God with a purpose: to bring the realm of God near. A Word of God who came "that people might have life and have it abundantly."

Remember how, in Matthew and Luke's versions of the temptations of Jesus, Jesus' first volley of resistance was: "*Humanity does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*" (Mt. 4:4; Lk. 4:4)? Jesus is not only quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. Filled and empowered by God's Spirit he is embodying that text, living that word. It's about keeping a God connection first and foremost; seeking what God wants as a top priority. What the God who created life wants is wholeness and fullness of life for all, and for all creation. That thread of God's purpose is strung throughout Scripture in word upon resonant word. And it keeps on showing up in followers of Jesus and believers in God like us. We can see it, hear it, feel it, experience it in one another. We can observe how we share it. When we see each other's faces, hear each other's voices in virtual worship and coffee time or at smaller meetings and gatherings it's noticeable. When you were able to gather and meet one another in person in the corridors of First United, and whenever we are able to do that again, it has been and will be noticeable. See, listen, participate in the giving and receiving of blessing, love, comfort, reassurance, etc. Look! In that entrance way, here's a woman who, at the moment, is living this word: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*" And here, round this corner outside Hilliard Hall stands a non-anxious young man who is living out the word: "*you are of more value than many sparrows.*" (Mt. 10:31) Down the hall from him, meet a whole family who is living into this truth: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up treasures in heaven. For where you treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" (Matthew 6:19-21) And do you notice that older man in the chapel who has been having tough times lately, and yet, he's living proof of "*I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.*" (Phil. 4:13)

In behind the Labyrinth room, in a gathering of youth for a Sunday Café, there's a spirit in the air that tells you they are endeavouring to live Proverbs 3:3-4:

*"Let not loyalty and faithfulness desert you;  
bind them about your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.  
So you will find favour and understanding in the sight of God and humankind."*

In the Labyrinth Room, you may meet some children who look like they are at play, but are actually getting to understand and be energized by Jesus when he once told crowds:

*"I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me shall never hunger,  
whoever believes in me shall never thirst."* (John 6:35)

In the vestibule outside the sanctuary, a grandmother with her daughter and grandson are sitting with a young couple who are participants in MT Space. Their conversation is a testimony to:

*"And, as your God, I will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things."* (Isaiah 58:11a)

And inside the sanctuary, on some given Sunday, the gathered congregation is inspired and encouraged by prayers, scripture reading, hymns, a sermon, and the choir's anthem all focussed on the theme of the *"living water gushing up to eternal life"* that Jesus offers (John 4:14). A like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, they are eager to go tell others about it, how it continues to refresh them.

And they are keen to invite those others to also receive what Jesus offers.

And, oh yes, did you take note this winter? On the railings and fence posts around the church, there were many bags of mitts, scarves, gloves, socks free for anyone who might need them.

Those offerings were made by First United congregants and lots of other neighbours.

Those offerings came from hearts determined to persist in living out Deuteronomy 15:11:

*"... the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I tell you,  
'Open wide your hand to your brothers and sisters who are needy and poor'."*

Keep the faith. Keep living out your faith, First United. Does this sound like this is us?

We shall not want. It is never a riddle about a glass being half full or half empty, our cup is forever running over.

Out of the abundance which God continues to give us to use and share,

our ministry and mission flow and happen and have impact,

our lives are upheld as they unfold into meaning and purpose.

That's rich! May God's Spirit continue to enable us to live as a blessed, generous people called to be a blessing to others and to all creation.