And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts.

We know we are at the beginning of Lent when we hear that Jesus has gone into the wilderness for 40 days.

Our season of Lent is patterned after his wilderness experience. Both the wilderness and the number 40 are symbols that occur again and again in scripture. Both represent periods of testing, of preparation, of waiting. Last fall we preached for several weeks on the wilderness experience of the Israelites, after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They were in the wilderness for 40 years. Moses was on the mountain for 40 days when he received God’s commandments. And when Noah was in the ark it rained and poured for 40 days. So by intentionally spending 40 days in the season of Lent, we relive and remember those stories in our own lives.

You don’t have to literally go to the wilderness, of course. The wilderness is a metaphor, and you can be wandering in the wilderness in the middle of a large city. But physically going to the wilderness is, I believe, very good for the soul. Especially living where we do. You have to travel a long way out of Chicago to get to a true wilderness area. In the United States, 5% of our land has been set aside as wilderness. And half of that is in Alaska.

If you’ve spent any time in wild places, then you know how the wilderness has a way of getting inside you. I lived in the West from 4th grade up through college, and hiked many miles of trails that got inside my memory. There is one wilderness in particular that is vivid in my mind – the Sawtooth Wilderness Area in central Idaho.

A couple of years ago, around October 1st, I returned to the Sawtooth Mountains for the first time since I was a teenager. There is a trail there that had been calling to me for years. I first hiked there with my dad, and still have his map of the region. It’s a 12 mile round-trip that leads up to one of the most spectacular places I have ever seen – Sawtooth Lake. It sits up high in the rocky peaks, right at the tree line, deep, blue, cold, awesome.
I wanted to go in the fall when I knew that the Aspen trees would be golden. Joe hiked this trail with me. We began early in the morning. The day started out cold and misty as we walked through the silent woods. We were the only ones on the trail. About an hour into the hike we came across something lying in the middle of the trail. It was the half-eaten leg of an elk. It felt like it had been placed there to warn us. Something had been gnawing on it recently. There were fresh signs of blood.

As we continued with our hike, that leg became a topic of conversation. We wondered what manner of wild beast had killed the elk. We wondered if the predator was still nearby. Joe reminded me that he considers being eaten alive the worst possible way to die.

After a couple more hours of climbing up switch-backs, we finally came to Sawtooth Lake. The sun was out, and it was as fantastic as I remembered. We were completely alone in the wilderness at the top of the world.

Suddenly, behind us, we heard a crashing sound coming out of the trees. We jumped to our feet as an animal came running toward us. Before we knew it, it was on top of Joe, wagging its tail and covering him with thick, dog kisses. The dog’s owner was right behind, apologizing for startling us and telling her beast to get off of Joe.

She was a forest ranger. She had the improbable name of Kevin. She asked where we were from, and after looking us up and down she said that she was impressed that 2 guys from Chicago had made it all the way up that trail. We were thankful she didn’t add middle-aged and overweight.

We asked her about that leg we had seen lying back on the trail. She said that it was probably the work of wolves. With so few hikers out that time of year, the wolves came down from the higher elevations to hunt elk. “This is their time,” she said. “This is the time of the wolves.” I felt a shiver run right down my spine, and I am certain that I heard an animal howl somewhere in the distance.

Before continuing on the trail to frighten other hikers, Kevin added, “If you’re lucky you might see a wolf. Keep your eyes open. They’re spectacular creatures. But don’t worry. They’re more afraid of you than you are of them.” I wasn’t entirely convinced.

Although I love being in the wilderness, it can feel as if I am only looking on like a tourist in a foreign country. There is a whole life going on that I don’t know or understand or feel a part of. But being out in the wilderness reminds us that we are a part of something much, much greater than ourselves. We are part of a vast and wild and ancient world that we did not create, and cannot re-create. We tend to forget the life of the wilderness in our lives in the city.

But God does not forget. The life in the wilderness is not independent of God. Our faith teaches us that the God is concerned about not just human life, but also the life of the wolf and the elk.
This first Sunday in Lent combines two very different Bible readings, the story of Jesus going into the wilderness and the story of Noah and the Ark. I have no idea why the good folks who put our lectionary together combined these two Bible stories. But as I studied them, there was one word that jumped out at me again and again that they both have in common. It’s the word for wild animal or wild beast.

Jesus is in the wilderness with the wild beasts. And in the Noah story, God blesses the wild beasts. God had just destroyed everything that moves on earth. Violence, greed, injustice, and murder - the children of Adam and Eve were full of it. And God had had enough of it. God says, “I regret that I ever made them.” And so God decides to wipe out everything and start all over again.

But after the flood, something happens in the heart of God. And God determines to never again destroy the world, no matter what. God makes a covenant with all of creation – not just with humans but with the animals. God doesn’t just love humanity. God loves the wild things and cares for their wellbeing.

Whoever wrote the story of Noah and the Ark believed that the only way that the whole world could ever be destroyed was through an act of God. Our ancient ancestors never would have imagined that one day we’d no longer need a god to destroy life on earth. Now we’re perfectly capable of doing so on our own.

God made a covenant to never destroy the earth. But we have not. God hung the rainbow up in the clouds as a reminder. The rainbow is a weapon of warfare. And God has hung that bow up in the clouds as a reminder of God’s promise. But the children of Adam and Eve and Noah have not learned to hang up our weapons. And we have not learned to make peace with the earth.

When Jesus goes into the wilderness for 40 days, there is a curious phrase in the Gospel of Mark. “He was with the wild beasts.” In the wilderness, Jesus was with the wild beasts. What the heck does that mean, Jesus was with the wild beasts? Mark doesn’t explain. But if you keep reading through Mark’s Gospel, starting in the next chapter, Jesus eats with the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus calls his disciples to be with him. Jesus is with his disciples in the boat during the storm. And Jesus even eats with his betrayer Judas. When Jesus dies, he does so with two thieves. Do you see a pattern here? When Jesus is with you he is on your side.

At the very start of his ministry, in the wilderness, Jesus is with the wild beasts. It’s as if Mark is saying that Jesus is like a new Adam in the garden, giving the animals names, or a like new Noah on the ark, feeding the animals and caring for them. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was with the wild beasts.
In the past couple of weeks we’ve been hearing politicians talk about the relationship between human being and the earth, and tossing around phrases like “phony theology.” So, what does our faith teach us about our relationship with the wild beasts? When God placed Adam in the garden, at the beginning of Genesis, God told Adam to till it and to keep it. To keep the garden is the same word used in that great priestly blessing – May God bless you and keep you.

What does that blessing mean? What does it mean for God to keep us? It means for God to care for us, preserve our lives, protect us, keep us safe, watch over us. Just as God keeps us and loves us, we are called to keep the garden. We are called to care for creation.

The season of Lent actually gives us an ancient Christian practice that can help us care for the earth. It’s the ancient practice of fasting.

I’ve had several conversations over the past week about Lent and whether or not we should fast during this season. American Protestants don’t typically do much fasting. At St. Pauls, we began this first Sunday in Lent with a pancake breakfast. And it was delicious.

Fasting is a part of pretty much every religion that I know of. Christians fast because Jesus himself fasted in the wilderness. We fast because Jesus just assumes that his own followers will fast.

Some people find that fasting helps their self-discipline. Others fast to clear their heads and to bring life to their prayers. I’ve never found any of that to be true in my life. I have to admit that I am not a fan of fasting. Let me tell you, if I’m hungry, look out. The wild beast in me comes out, and I’m ready to start gnawing on the next leg of an elk that I see. Fasting doesn’t make me holy. Fasting makes me irritable – and so, it shows me how deeply I need God’s grace. That, for me, is the personal benefit of fasting. Not forty days of guilt, but forty days of grace.

But fasting in our modern world takes on a whole new meaning from what it did in Jesus’ day. Although we might want to fast in order to try and enhance our prayer life or self-discipline, we now need to learn to fast for the wellbeing of the whole world.

The wild beasts of the wilderness need human beings to learn to fast, to learn to give up what we don’t need. To learn to say no to our greed and our excessive consumption and consumerism. To say no to our bottomless thirst for fossil fuels. The future of the wilderness and of the wild beasts depend upon whether we can learn to say no. There is a movement among many Christians to go on a carbon fast for Lent that reduces our carbon footprint in God’s garden. I like that.

In order to keep our garden, we’ve got to learn fasting as a lifestyle. We’ve got to learn to consume less, eat less; walk more, drive less. Christians, of all people, should know that the depths of grace and happiness are found, as Jesus said, not in the abundance of our possessions, but in living simpler and kinder lives that respect the world we live in.
We are part of a vast and amazing creation. We do not own the world, and we cannot live only for ourselves. We live with the wild beasts. We share this world with the wolves and the elk and all the animals of the wilderness. Our wellbeing depends on the wilderness, and the health of the wilderness depends upon us. It’s a world of wonders. A world worth keeping.

Scripture Texts

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. 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. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”