

Where the Wild Things Are
Mark 1:9-15
Lent 1
21 February 2021
sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae

When I was a girl I always wanted to visit Trafalgar Square in London England, to see all the pigeons. I'd grown up watching Mary Poppins and loved the song about feeding the birds, "tuppence a bag". I loved the idea of so many creatures living among people in the density of the city. I loved the romantic notion that the birds were always there for lonely people who needed some companionship. So you can imagine my sadness when, finally making it to London I learned that the pigeons were now somewhat more scarce than the movies and film footage I'd seen growing up.

Back in the year 2000, Mayor Livingstone, hating the havoc of hundreds of birds on the statues in the square and the health hazard he insisted they posed, waged war against the pigeon. He forbid the feeding of the pigeons, employed a hawk handler to hunt them and turned hoses on the then starving birds. It was truly awful, and gave rise to animal rights groups trying to protect the pigeons. To this day subversive groups still feed the pigeons in different locations of the square each day, still tend to the ailing and injured ones and still

believe there is a place for the pigeon in Trafalgar Square. But it raised some interesting questions. How does one contain an overabundance of birds, how does one contain a flood of energy? How does one ensure that life isn't overrun by nature?

Whenever I think of the Trafalgar Square pigeons, their plight, their fight, the supporters and their foes, whenever I think of the way they utterly disrupted the Square, but also brought joy to those who could see and appreciate the birds for the interesting characters they are, I begin to understand why scripture writers have used the dove as an image for the Spirit of God. A dove is after all just a pigeon by another name. And when left to fly free through a square or a church or a life, a pigeon or the Spirit of God can wreak havoc, can frustrate and send you running, and it can fill you with joy, make you take notice of little things, calm you with its gentle cooing.

But truth be told, more often than not, it disrupts.

Look at our gospel reading today. Although this little 6 verse passage is about Jesus, the main player is, without a doubt, the Holy Spirit. No sooner has Jesus come up out of the waters of baptism, we are told than "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Immediately drove him into the wilderness. In just a few

short breaths we have gone from the image of a gentle dove telling Jesus he is beloved to the frantic beating of wings driving him into the wilderness to be tempted and hang with the wild beasts and angels. Mark doesn't bother to elaborate what happened during those 40 days in the wilderness, the 40 days that our Lenten journey is based upon, but he does tell us, or hints at the fact Jesus was changed by the experience. By the end of the reading Jesus finally speaks and after the arrest of his cousin John, begins a ministry of his own, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come and that all should repent and believe in the good news.

To this point though, the Good News is pretty vague. What Good News? If we were reading this for the first time we know nothing about Easter morning, we know nothing about the hope and the promise of new life that Christ brings. We know only about relationship, relationship with the Holy Spirit. And the Good News that God's Spirit wants to be in relationship with us. But what does that look like?

Every Lent it is like we are beginning a new and fresh journey, trying to understand the route we are to take, trying to discern the changing landscape around us. Where will this journey take us this

year? How will we experience the events along the road to Jerusalem? What message does God have for us this time? What will it feel like to enter into intentional repentance? What are we being called to wrestle with in the wilderness this year?

This morning we are reminded that when we take on a committed spiritual life, it will change us, just as it changed Jesus. In that moment that Jesus chose baptism, in that moment that he publicly declared that he was ready to begin a new journey with God, he was driven to change. The Holy Spirit after reassurances of love, then beat wings of change driving him off, forcing him to discover what it means to be beloved. What it means to live as beloved.

And I love that image. And it is such an important one for us today as we embark on this Lenten journey and reflect more deeply on what it means to be a disciple, what it means to actively engage with Jesus and a life of faith. This relationship, this journey, is about active and personal engagement. It is about listening to the voice of God meant for us, specifically, and what it means for us to answer. It is about comfort and connection, but even more than that it is about being changed by relationship with the Holy Spirit. This is some serious business, being a person of faith. And today at the start of

our Lenten journey we are invited to live like we believe that, like we believe, we know, that this matters.

The temptation of course comes in living like it doesn't. Like it doesn't matter. Because that is easier. It is so much easier to just get reassurance without living seeking out hope. It is so much easier to ask for forgiveness without doing the intentional work of repentance. It is so much easier to just keep doing what we are doing without examining how we might do things differently to live out our faith more authentically. Those are the wild beasts in our faith life, all those things that are so prevalent in our society today – taking the easiest path, expecting something for nothing, being loved by God and not responding to that love, thinking we somehow deserve God's forgiveness, deserve God's love. Truth is, we deserve very little, we are entitled to nothing. The Good News, the miracle of our faith is that we are forgiven and loved by God even when we've done absolutely nothing to deserve it.

That is the truth of our faith. The Holy Spirit wants this relationship with us despite the fact we aren't "owed" relationship. God owes us nothing. The choice we are faced with today though, the choice Jesus was faced with after he dried himself off and began

to wander away from the river bank that day, is how we will live in response. God is giving us all this love that we've done nothing to earn. What now? We can ignore the Spirit altogether, or take what we want when we want it and get cozy with the wild beasts of entitlement, or in a move straight out of Trafalgar Square we can chase off the Holy Spirit, starve it, attack it, make sure it has no place in our lives.

Or we can give thanks for the opportunity for relationship and enter in fully and openly.

We can follow where the Spirit leads, knowing that wherever it takes us there will be angels waiting on us, and new life being born.

That is the choice we are faced with today, at the start of this Lenten journey. In a very real way we are being asked if we want to make the journey at all. Because this is a journey, and when we embark intentionally, can be changing, should be changing. It has the power to awaken us to the ways that God is calling us to engage in relationship with God and with our world. It has the power to awaken us to ways that we can make changes inside us to be more alert, more alive to the Spirit, more whole as spiritual being. It can cause us to give thanks for the love and forgiveness God extends,

and make us examine our lives and truly and fully repent, be honest about how we are falling short, what behaviour need changing, what thinking needs changing, how we can get in line with what God envisions for our lives. How will we respond to this persistent dove inviting us to fly with her?

It is tough business living with the Holy Spirit. It can be demanding, invade our space, make a lot of noise and unsettle our lives in the most unexpected ways. And thank God for that.

And those pigeons, they are still in Trafalgar Square. Numbering in the hundreds, not the thousands. But they remain, a wonderful symbol of determination, a reminder that not everything is in our control.

The kingdom of God has come near – listen to the flap of her wings. Repent, and believe in the good news. Come, our Lenten walk has begun.