

## A Year of Beasts and Angels

John 1:9-13

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Rev. Chris Holmes recently delivered a lecture at the Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church in Washington DC on the topic of artful living. During the lecture, he asked the members of his audience (who were all adults over 40) to raise their hands if they could draw. Two or three people raised their hands. Then Chris told them that he had recently asked a kindergarten class the same question and all the children raised their hands. Then Chris asked, "what happened to us?"

He was probing a mystery of human development. Why do we think we can draw, sing, dance, and create when we are young children, but conclude that we are unable to do those things by the time we reach adulthood? Who told us that we could not sing, draw or dance? Who made us believe that we are not artistic, athletic, mathematically astute or graceful? These inquiries lead us to an even larger curiosity; What forces shape our view of ourselves? What dynamics influence our own self awareness?

Dr. Henry C. Blount Jr. in his book **Soul Sounds: Reflections on the Higher Self** states: "Everyone is handed a script. It is our blueprint for life. And it can be a drama, a comedy, or a farce. Or just a dull routine. A script comes from our cultural conditioning. It is the way we "should" act out our life—according to family, society, and church—or the world in general." According to Dr. Blount, our conclusions about who we are come from the interactions we have with family, friends, teachers, coaches, employers, pastors and the larger messages generated by our culture about who or what we are "suppose" to be.

A few weeks ago, we played a little game at our Wednesday night Bible study. I gave the group a word and asked each participant to tell me whether that word made his or her mind go to the past, the present or the future. I thought it was a very good sign that when I said "home" almost everyone said they thought of the present. However, when I said "beauty" virtually everyone but the youngest among us thought of the past. I think that means that most of us have bought into our culture's appraisal of beauty which defines it by specific body types and facial features that are usually associated with young adulthood. We therefore think of ourselves as less beautiful because we no longer match up to the glossy images extolled by the media. Yet we all know that one of the most beautiful people in our church was the woman who died last Wednesday. Hetty Shear at 96 defined grace and beauty, just not in the ways Madison Avenue defines it.

All such influential images and messages, suggest Dr. Blount, forms the "script" by which we develop our concept of who we are. But, Dr Blount further writes, "this script does not have to be acted out as the world gives it. . . we can alter our scripts all along the way." To illustrate his point, the author writes, "Look at the script the world handed Jesus. They gave him hatred— but he returned love. They handed him betrayal, but he gave forgiveness. They gave him death, but he returned life."

From now until Easter, we are going to examine, both on Sundays during worship and on Wednesdays during Bible Study, how Jesus filtered through the variety of messages he received from his culture about who he was, to identify and fully embrace the true self God made him to be. Why should we spend so much time on such an exploration? Two reasons. 1. Since we are disciples of Jesus, we need to know as much about Him and his journey through this life as possible. 2. We too must sort through the hundreds of messages we get from those around us about who we are, to discover and fully embrace the person that God created us to be. The culture, or some

significant group in our past or present may say we are homely, stupid, old, sick, fat, wicked, incompetent, confused, damaged, ruined, unreliable or a thousand other negative adjectives. Or, we may be some of the fortunate ones whom the culture extols for our facial features, body type, kind of knowledge, category of skill, particular sense of humor, current age and health status, present income, or a thousand other characteristics society deems as preferable. As a result, we may suffer from too low an evaluation of ourselves or from an inflated view of our own importance. Either way, we can benefit greatly from studying how our Lord, who was peppered with similar influences, found a way to deflect every cultural message about who he was and center in solely on God's definition of his identity.

Today's passage provides an excellent way to begin this study. Mark 1:9 tells us "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee." Everybody comes from somewhere. Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he grew up in Nazareth of Galilee. Galilee was the hill country where the less educated, working folks lived. The scholars, lawyers, religious elite and economic upper crust lived in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities of Judea. The fishermen, farmers, seamstresses, tanners, carpenters, construction workers, road builders, textile producers and day laborers lived in Galilee. The citizens of Jerusalem looked down upon Galileans as being rude, unrighteous, illiterate, brawny, backwoods hicks, for lack of a better word. Nazareth was one of the smallest villages in this region of insignificant, undistinguished, two-bit towns. Nathaniel, a Galilean, a man from the sticks in other words, saw Nazareth as too backward for even his tastes. Upon hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, Nathaniel asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

In my mind, Nazareth must have been like LeCompte, Louisiana. When I was a boy, my parents would drive from my grandparents home in Jena, Louisiana to New Orleans where my brother and sister resided. Back in those days, we had to travel a two-lane road that ran from the cotton fields of central Louisiana into the swamp of south Louisiana. About half way, my dad would turn off the two lane, black top road and drive about a half a mile to LeCompte. At that time, there was nothing there but a half a dozen old rickety homes, a dirty convenience store and Lea's restaurant. My father loved the ham sandwiches made in that restaurant so he always turned off there. I'd look out the window of our Rambler station wagon at the empty street and broken down town and think to myself, "I thought Salina, Kansas was a small town, but this place is a dump. How could anything of any value come from this place?"

That's the kind of place Jesus was from. That's the kind of place that influenced his earliest self-understanding. He did not hail from the big city, the finest schools, the richest cultural environment. Without the influence of God in his life, Jesus could have concluded that he was from far too god forsaken a place to ever make a contribution in this world.

But God did influence his life. Mark 1:9 tells us that Jesus 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 upon him like a dove." In Isaiah 64:1, the famous prophet Isaiah prayed that God would tear open the heavens and descend upon the people of Israel. Mark uses the same language to describe Jesus' baptism. The heavens didn't just part like clouds do on a windy day, they were torn apart by God. Much later in this same Gospel, in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion, Mark employs the same imagery to say that the curtain in the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. In both cases Mark is telling us that God is taking action to teach us who Jesus is. Folks in Jerusalem might say Jesus is an insignificant country boy from some backwater town up in the hills, but God rips open the heavens to make a counter statement. The Lord calls down from heaven to Jesus and says, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." One part of this statement is also found in Psalm 2 which is a coronation Psalm for a king. The other phrase is contained in Isaiah 42 which is a song extolling the sacrifice of an unnamed servant of God. Put the two phrases together and we get a new identity for Jesus. Rather than be identified as the blue collar kid from nowheresville, Jesus is given a new identity at his baptism as the beloved son of God, the king who would serve the world.

Baptism renames us all. We're all from someplace. Think of the Monopoly board. Maybe you were born on Park Place or possibly you hail from a more modest dwelling on New York Avenue. Possibly your dad was working on the railroad all the live long day or perhaps you come from folks who needed a "get a jail free" card. Our upbringing has caused us to make certain conclusions about ourselves, some good, some not so good. Jesus comes into our lives and calls us to follow him as disciples and some respond to his loving invitation by being baptized. When we do, God renames us. We are no longer that clumsy Burns kid from Kansas or that beauty queen from New York City or that sports hero from the university or that drop out from high school. We are the beloved daughter or son of God in whom God is fully pleased.

In some ways, it would be nice if our baptism took us directly into our heavenly home. If Jesus's baptism would have been immediately followed by his ascension, he would have been spared a lot of pain and struggle. Instead, however, Mark says that immediately after his baptism, "the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness." That phrase "drove him" is exactly the same phrase used to describe how Christ ran evil spirits out of the demon possessed. Mark is telling us that God is behind this journey that Jesus must now take in the wilderness. He goes on to tell us that Jesus was in wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan."

Satan's temptations always have the same purpose; they are attempts to get us to trade a gift of God for something of far less value. Forty-five years ago, I paid a quarter at the county fair to spin a big arrow on a board. The board was filled with prizes. The prize on the smallest section was a necklace made of real gold. Before I spun the arrow I watched a dozen other fair goers take a chance that ended on one of the two dozen other prizes. Then I took a turn and the arrow ended up in the tiny crevice underneath the golden necklace. When the carnival employee saw what happened, he immediately said, "what would a fine young man like you want with that necklace? A boy like you should have one of these knives" and with that he pointed to a tiny, sheathed knife no bigger than a finger nail clipper. Being ten and unformed about things of lasting value, I made the swap.

That's what the power of evil always tries to get us to do. God offers gifts of precious value and Satan works to get us to trade what God has given us for something of far less value. In this case, Satan is trying to get Jesus to trade the identity God has granted him, the beloved son of God, the servant King for any number of lesser identities. The Gospel reports that this season of temptation went on for 40 days and then subsided for awhile, but Mark never indicates that the temptation fully ceased. Instead, he relates that Jesus lived in this process of temptation or testing and was constantly accompanied by beasts and angels.

Beasts refers to those ominous influences and threats that lurk around us and continually attempt to convince us that we are not who God says we are. We read in Isaiah 35 that at the end of our earthly journey, as we walk the highway of the redeemed into the heavenly gates, we will finally be rid of the beasts. In other words, only then will we finally escape the toxic voices of those who try to get us to settle for some identity other than the one given to us by God: beloved children in whom God is well pleased.

Of course the good news in this story is that not only are there beasts with Jesus, the angels accompany him as well. Angels are the heavenly messengers that persistently remind us of our identity in Christ. We might wonder why the Spirit drove Jesus out into a place where he would be tempted by Satan and haunted by beasts.

Why not just put Jesus in the midst of the angels? Because Christ had to show us how to live in this world that is always populated by beasts and angels and the temptations of evil so that we would learn how to tune out the preponderance of cultural messages about who we are and cling to the identity God has given us in our baptisms as beloved sons and daughters of God in whom the Lord is well pleased.

Joanne Lyles White died in March after a lifetime of discipleship to Christ. I'm holding her obituary this morning. It reads that she was a "humanitarian, philanthropist, educator, and social justice advocate, a tenacious and passionate advocate for the poor, the dispossessed, single mothers, orphaned children, the disabled and incarcerated." The newspaper clipping goes on to report that "Mrs. White was married for 59 years, had six children and thirteen grandchildren and was a career high school teacher of American History and Speech. She also taught Sunday School in her church and sang in the choir for over sixty years." Three paragraphs are required to list all the awards and accomplishments Ms White achieved in her life including becoming one of the few white women in history to receive the Sojourner Truth award. Oh, and by the way, Joanne Lyles White was the eighth of 12 children born to and raised by parents who were sharecroppers in . . . LeCompte, Louisiana.

What gave Joanne the ability to listen to the angels rather than the beasts? Here is what the paper said, "Mrs. White was first inspired to service and charity as a young girl, after reading Pearl Buck's accounts of peasant life in rural China. She gave her time, talent, and energy unselfishly and exhaustively because she felt compelled by her deep faith in Christ."

I don't pretend to know what this new year holds for any of us in any specific detail. But in a general way I know exactly what 2012 will hold for every one of us. It will contain Beasts and Angels. Influences that will try to get us to settle for an identity far inferior to the one God gave us in our baptisms as well as messengers that will continually call us to believe we are who God says we are. May we spend this year learning from Jesus to silence the beasts and trust in the message of angels. Amen.