

**Wild Beasts**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent (B)**  
**(Mk 1:12-15)**

When St. Matthew and St. Luke describe the Temptation of the Lord in the Desert they list the three temptations of the devil. However, St. Mark is very brief and only speaks of Jesus being among “wild beasts” for 40 days. Psalm 91, which was prayed by Jesus in the temptation, refers to them: *“You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot”* (Ps 91:13).

The Bible documents many instances of travelers being attacked and mauled by lions and bears (1K 13:24-26, 2K 2:23-25), and brave shepherds having to protect themselves from the wild beasts which were prevalent in the area at the time of the Bible (Jdg 14:6, 1 Sm 17:34-36).

In the wilderness, Jesus subdues the wild beasts, they do not harm him. Though not explicitly stated, it is likely that Jesus restores the wild beasts to the “dominion” of man which they originally had in the Garden of Eden, before sin introduced disharmony and hostility into nature (Gn 1:28-30, 2:18-20).

In the wilderness, Jesus is confronting nature as it has been distorted by the devil, and restoring it to its original order. There is no disorder within him, but rather he finds disorder around him. Our 40 day Lent, on the other hand, does not require us to go out to a wilderness area where there are rattlesnakes, coyotes, and bobcats. Our desert is our own soul, and it is there that we already dwell among wild beasts. There are many hostile, out-of-control, destructive forces within us that are continually stirred up by the devil and used to harm us.

These “wild beasts” are easily recognized in the Capital Sins. They are monsters in our human nature, powerful and disturbing, leading to destructive behaviors, causing discord instead of harmony, disorder instead of order, slavery instead of dominion.

**Anger/Wrath** – hot temper, impatience, cursing, road rage

**Lust** – inability to control sexual appetite, disordered sexual needs, addiction to pornography, same-sex attraction

**Greed/Avarice** – compulsive stealing, cheating, desire for money, gambling addiction, uncontrolled spending, inability to manage finances

**Gluttony** – uncontrolled eating, alcoholism, drug addiction

**Envy** – hatred and resentment of others, inability to forgive

The wild beasts are not sin yet. They are temptation, which attacks us and leads to sin. Our spiritual battle is not to let these beasts conquer us (sin), but to conquer and “tame” them as Jesus did, in the process banishing the evil one who works through them.

Lent is a sacred time of grace for confronting our disordered nature, with spiritual weapons deriving from Jesus’ own 40 days in the wilderness. A Christian must not avoid, ignore, or deny these problems lurking in his soul, shirking the duty to do something about them. Like David slaying Goliath through the skills of a shepherd (1Sm 17:34-36), or like Samson killing the Lion through the strength of his Nazirite consecration to God (Jdg 14:6), Christians must learn how to wield the spiritual weapons given by the Lord, and take up the “spiritual campaign” proclaimed in the opening prayer of Ash Wednesday.

1) **Prayer.** We cannot fight the beasts by our strength. We depend on God’s grace. Once we have identified the wild beast(s) we will be tackling during Lent, daily prayer has to be brought to bear on the situation. We have to be constantly alert to the activity of that beast: how it arises, what aggravates it, what calms it, where our weaknesses are. Each morning we must talk to God and ask for the insights and specific graces to resist and fight that temptation. Throughout the day we must call upon the Lord, and in the evening we must give a report on the successes or failures.

There may be a particular spiritual regimen of prayer and devotion that is needed: certain psalms, for instance, daily Rosary, and more frequent confession. Highly recommended is praying with others so that we do not fight alone. God sent Jesus angels in the wilderness which “ministered to him.” God likewise sends us angels, some invisible, but others the good people in our lives. Families should pray together, with parents helping to guide and direct their children’s spiritual battles. There is strength in numbers, and in being open with each other about the areas we need help in, or are out of control.

2) **Fasting.** The wild beasts are forces of our human nature: desires and appetites. They can be very powerful, demanding to the point of compelling us, and if they are out of control they become very destructive. They have to be disciplined and brought under control, and the way to do that is by means of well-placed fasting. The beast must be denied or curbed at the point where it bites. A wild horse needs a bridle and bit, and a strong rope so that it can be tied down and forced to walk only where the master leads it, no matter how much it bucks and fights. Whatever is feeding, causing, or triggering our addictions and compulsions must be cut off. Lent is a time for this self-denial, sacrifice, “giving up” the things that are leading to the harmful and disordered behaviors.

Fasting is not the same as repressing. Repression is the vain effort to subdue the beast by containing its power. This will only end in a resurgence of the beast's force. The goal is not to suppress, but to tame the beast, bringing it under the dominion of will and reason, so that its power is in service of God and fellow man. Thus, for instance, when fasting from the disordered compulsion to overeat, the goal is not to prevent the eating appetite, but rather to expose and "be with" the particular uncomfortable feeling within the soul that we try to placate through the eating. Every compulsion is a sinful "indulging of the flesh," the attempt to satisfy a spiritual hunger in a physical way. We have to understand what that spiritual "hunger" is which is underlying the disordered behavior, and bring that to the Lord who can truly heal, instead of finding a cheap but false solution that only relieves surface symptoms without doing anything to help the real problem. When Jesus fasts and becomes hungry, the devil urges him to satisfy that hunger with rocks, false bread, "cheating." Jesus tells him man's true bread is God's word. Jesus shows us how fasting brings us to the crossroads where we can choose integrity, truly nourishing our soul, instead of trying to placate the beast by feeding *it*.

3) **Almsgiving.** This is the final important weapon, and without it all other efforts will fail. All of the disorder and "wildness" which have turned our human dignity into "beastliness" has resulted from selfishness. Every one of our problems goes back to the first capital sin, Pride, whereby we made ourselves our own end. Through narcissistic pride we are turned in on self. That is why we indulge the flesh, grab, take, and run roughshod over the rights of others, bringing pain and suffering to everyone around us. We are selfish.

We will restore order and harmony to nature and society (and our soul) when we put others first. Appetite for food and drink is directed to the good of the body and well-being of those celebrating a meal. Sexual appetite serves the marriage covenant and is directed to the growth of the family. Money is a servant which provides for the needs of one's household as well as the parish and larger community. In all cases, the focus and goal must be *charity*, the goal is others, and the discover of our own well-being in the common good of others.

During 40 days Jesus dwelt with wild beasts in the wilderness, tempted by the devil, while angels ministered to him. We know the end result: devil defeated, wild beasts tamed, human nature manifested in its full glory, all faculties in the harmony of grace, ordered to service.

*"Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint"* (Collect, Ash Wednesday).