

**Homily for March 5, 2006
First Sunday of Lent (B)**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Gene 9:8-15
Psalm 25:4-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15**

This lent, we exchange some things for better things.

“He was among wild beasts,” St. Mark chapter 1 says of Jesus.

This brief depiction of Jesus’ 40 days in the desert causes the believer to recall a similar passage from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 11, a passage originally giving hope to the nation of Israel in turmoil but that came to refer to the peace Jesus would bring through his death and resurrection. “Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the deer shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra’s den, and the child lay his hand on the adder’s lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea,” says Isaiah.

In St. Mark’s version of Jesus’ 40 Days, the wild beasts echo a time at which God will bring all fighting and killing, all hatred and bickering to a close. In its place, as a sign of that shalom, the wild animals will dwell in peace – wolf with lamb, leopard with the kid. “And a little child shall lead them,” Isaiah adds. In the Great Day, a little child shall lead them. You know the rest: “And his name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, the Prince of Peace.” Isaiah spoke those words as well in chapter 9.

Remember the early American painting, “The Peaceable Kingdom,” by the Quaker preacher Edward Hicks? In it, all of the animals gathered together, their eyes open in a kind of innocent wonder that they are not falling upon each other in a horrific feast. Instead, their wonderment is that they are all gathered together for this family portrait. And in the center, the Quaker artist painted the child, one arm relaxing on the mane of a lion and the other, a tiger. All the while, the oxen and sheep and goats rest in peace. God’s peace. Led by this little child.

Well, I don’t know about you, but I need this version of the wild beasts the most as this Lenten season begins. I need to know that I am not left just with the darkness down inside, not burdened always by the fear and sin and guilt we all carry around. I need to know that the wild beasts roaming this world in these days are not the final word. Instead, with our Lord, the possibility with our Lord of a journey toward that peaceable kingdom. A time to give up and let go of some of that baggage, traveling lighter with Christ through this wilderness we call Lent.

But let’s face the brute reality that has been our condition since we left Eden. We cannot journey toward our God by our own will and through our own strength. That is futility...and a good dose of pride as well. But recall St. Mark once again. There in the

wilderness, in addition to those wild beasts, “the angels ministered to him.” Literally translated, “the angels did him table service.” And this image is central to our consideration of the issues of wilderness and journey on this First Sunday of Lent. Not angels, but the Risen Lord himself is with us, feeding us his own glorified Body and Blood. Not just any bread, but the Bread come down from heaven. Food and drink enough to sustain us in this Lenten season. Provision against the wild beasts of the day. Until that Day when the lion finally does lie down with the lamb. And we rejoice with neither fear nor shame in that eternal and peaceable kingdom.

And part of the openness God can use to draw near us with peace is through the sacrament of reconciliation that we’ll be celebrating as three parishes, together at St. Matthias a week from this coming Thursday at 7:00 p.m. It’s not about our sin. It’s about God’s love coming near, precisely in and through our unloving choices...through our sins. That’s where we’re weak. That’s our desert place. That’s where God can be God to us.

We might want to heed Bishop Fulton Sheen’s good advice on Lenten penance: “Self-discipline never means giving up anything, for giving up is a loss. Our Lord did not ask us to give up the things of the earth, but to exchange them for better things.”

**This lent, we exchange some things
for better things.**