

*And immediately the Spirit cast Jesus out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by the Accuser, and was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. (Mark 1:12-13, David Bentley Hart's translation.)*

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief  
of one kind and another  
his mother called him *Wild Thing!*  
and Max said *I'll eat you up!*  
so he was sent to bed without eating anything.

That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until . . .  
the walls became the world all around  
and Max sailed off night and day  
for almost a year to where the wild things are.

And when he came to the place where the wild things are  
they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth  
and rolled their terrible eyes  
and showed their terrible claws . . .

I wonder if the fourth century Desert Fathers inspired Maurice Sendak's story?  
Struggling monks were sent to their rooms and told *Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything*. The solitude of the cell soon crowded with wild things, threatening things, as the monk came face to face with himself.

Properly understood, the advice to stay in one's cell and let it teach you everything offers some of the spiritual wisdom of the ages. When we are sorely tempted to betray our better angels, when the wild things of our imaginations plague us and drive us to act contrary to our well-being, the first thing we must learn to do is—**nothing**.

To act impulsively, to act before we have clarity, is to reenact old habits, to repeat the very behaviors that landed us in a quandary in the first place. To be freed from the destructive desires that enslave us we must learn to sit, wait, and watch. Who has the time or the patience?

The voice in our head will scream *Stop wasting time! Do something, anything!* This sitting, this waiting is a very definite and profound something. It is a great act of faith. The wild thoughts, the temptations, will not magically evaporate. But, if we persevere, neither fleeing nor giving in, the cell will teach us everything.

It will teach us that the desires and passions that ensnare us are not truly satisfied by things that tempt us, but will, if acted upon, betray us. It will show us that the very

things that drive these passions and give fuel to the temptations: our fears, lust, greed, are seeking comfort and consolation in illusions.

Lent begins in the wilderness with the wild beasts, and in Mark's version, with an angelic catering service. Mark allows neither Jesus nor the reader to bask in the warm assurance of God's love and delight. *At once*, immediately following Jesus' baptism, he is forcefully pitched, thrown out (same Greek word Mark uses to describe exorcisms—a forceful ejection) into the desert, a symbolic site for arduous testing. The instigator of this trial is the same Spirit who descended on Jesus in his baptismal waters.

With the forceful ejection of Jesus by the Spirit into combat with the Accuser, Mark's understanding of spirituality is rougher and darker than our self-improvement varieties. His gospel will not be the tender account of a kindly teacher roaming the Galilean calm.

His is a story of apocalyptic warfare, with this world a theater for cosmic combat between demons and angels, between a seductive Accuser and God's anointed. Mark does not end the tale with Mathew's defiant "Begone, Satan!" or with any assurance that Jesus' trials are over. Mark's version of the temptation is left open-ended.

Max tames the wild things by staring into their yellow eyes without blinking once and they become afraid of him and call him the most wild thing of all. If fear prevents us from unblinkingly confronting the "wild things" terrorizing us, if we refuse to go into our cells, to sit, to wait, the Spirit will, at a time of its own choosing, drive us into the wilderness to confront the wilderness within.

The wilderness is not designed for comfort. It is the place where we come face to face with our selves and with God. Max found his supper waiting for him in his room as he returned from taming the wild things. Summoning the courage to confront the wilderness within, like Jesus, you may know, like Jesus, the ministry of the angels.