

LENT ONE, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 18, 2024

There's story about a young woman who was taking a walk one evening when she heard a voice say "Help me! Help me!" The woman looked all around, but saw no one there. But then, once again, the pleading voice came. "Help me! Help me!"

This time, the woman looked down and saw a small green frog sitting by her feet. She bent over and picked up the little frog and looked at it. Suddenly, the frog spoke. "Please help me!" the frog said. "You see, I am really a handsome prince who has been turned into a frog by a wicked witch. If you kiss me, I will turn back into a prince, and I will love you and kiss you and adore you forever."

The woman took a long moment to think about this. But then without saying a word she took the frog, stuck it into her pocket, and continued on her way.

The little frog looked up from inside the pocket. "Hey! You! Is something wrong? Why won't you help me? Why won't you kiss me and let me become your beautiful prince?"

The woman looked down at the little green frog and said, "Frankly, my dear, at my age, I'd rather have a talking frog!"

Now what does this silly little story have to do with the first Sunday of Lent. Trust me I'll get there. I think that no matter how old we get sometimes we crave a fairy tale ending to whatever is troubling us, our children or our grandchildren at any given moment. There is something ingrained in us that want that Prince/Princess happily ever after scenario. So, to me the women wanting a talking frog represents practicality. I believe most of us want to approach life with reasonable intelligence so that we, hopefully, will make good and practical decisions. When we take this practical approach to life we don't allow ourselves to be taken in by happily ever after scenarios and, instead, we'll settle for a talking frog to keep us company.

However, and this is the big however, we know life isn't fair and that even being practical doesn't mean life is going to go according to plan and that sometimes we get so knocked down by life we can't seem to get back up. We struggle to find a way to get back on our feet and at times, if it wasn't for the unexpected and that unexpected could even be an individual, we would never have made it. So the talking frog can also represent the unexpected or that individual who is there to help us through those moments when life has totally knocked the wind out of us and nothing we do seems to get us back on our feet.

Now how does this tie into the Gospel this morning. One of the things I love about Mark is his brevity and often stark accounting of events. In just a few sentences Mark tells us that Jesus is baptized, declared God's beloved and then led out to the desert where he is tempted and is with wild beats and angels. It could be summed up like this: Jesus, Baptism, God's beloved, wilderness, temptation, wild beasts, angels.

So, we go from this wonderful happily ever after story with Jesus being declared God's beloved to the Spirit immediately driving him into the stark inhospitable desert. The result of Jesus' baptism is to be thrust or driven into the unknown, the unexpected, the terrors and temptations of life. He doesn't stay in the land of beautiful princes or princesses but to the place where life has unpredictable twists and turns and despair. Jesus is in the desert literally and figuratively. He is tempted by everything imaginable.

He is surrounded by wild beasts or the things that scare the bejeesus out of anyone. But we also are told he is attended to by angels.

So on this first Sunday of Lent we realize that Lent can be a time to take stock of our lives, to come clean about the things that tempt us and the things that scare us. Most of the time we emphasize that our Lenten discipline should be about acknowledging "the harm we have done and the good we have left undone". But perhaps Lent can also be a time for us to recognize God's presence in our lives even when we don't recognize God's presence or when we are at our lowest, when we are in total despair and don't know what to do or where to turn. This temptation story tells us that Jesus was not alone in the desert and neither are we.

So, here's what I think we can do during Lent which is very rarely attributed to being a part of our Lenten discipline – and that has to do with angels. Mark says the angels attended Jesus in the wilderness. Perhaps Lent invites us to do another Lenten inventory, an accounting of the angels we have known and loved and who have loved us, in the wilderness times of our own lives. It's an opportunity to remember those angels, those talking frogs, that show up when we're tired, thirsty and surrounded by wild beasts just as they did for Jesus.

Who am I speaking of? We all have different times in our lives that someone has helped us through a rough patch or a desert experience perhaps even unknowingly. There's a story about a boy named Bill who was the youngest of three children. He was in the sixth grade, in the 1960's when his father began to manifest signs of what turned out to be a severe mental illness. The day before Bill's fourteenth birthday, his father was committed to the State Hospital. Because of the stigma about mental illness at that time and which still exists today, neither his mother nor his grandparents wanted anyone to know what had happened. The family story was simply that his father was away on business.

The silence around his father's illness and hospitalization only increased Bill's fears. In addition, because jokes about the mentally ill and places like the State Hospital abounded in that time, his friends often made cracks about the "Looney Bin." Bill would join in the laughter. What else could he do? None of his teachers, not even the minister at the church, knew of his father's situation.

The one exception was Mr. Moore, his 4-H leader and a trusted family friend. Bill never talked with him directly about his dad, but he knew that Mr. Moore somehow knew what had happened. That made a difference.

The week before his dad's birthday, Bill's mother told him she wanted him and his sisters to go with her to the State Hospital for the day. Bill was terrified. He had no idea what to expect from either his father or the other patients. All he knew were all the stories he'd heard about "maniacs" and other crazy people. He dreaded walking through the hospital gates with his mother and sisters. How could he protect them from what he imagined they would find? He told his mother he didn't want to go.

But his mother insisted that he go and they were at an impasse until a few days before the visit, his mother asked Bill if it would help to have someone else come along. Bill immediately thought of Mr. Moore who agreed to go. Bill said it was like a gift from God. "Going through the hospital gates, seeing my father for the first time in weeks--all of it was still scary. But having Mr. Moore along made a difference. He knew what to say and do. He simply gave my dad a big hug and teased him about getting old. He shared

stories about all the funny things he and my dad had done together. He got him to ask me and my sisters about our 4-H projects and school”.

"We stayed until visiting hours were over," Bill continued. "It was actually hard to leave, which surprised me since I'd dreaded it so much. But as we walked out, I realized I was no longer afraid or ashamed. Having Mr. Moore there made it seem normal, like we were all around the kitchen table at home and not in the visitors' room at the State Hospital. He made us feel normal, too. That my dad was still my dad, even if he was dealing with a mental illness."

"Mr. Moore wasn't anyone special," Bill concluded. "He wasn't trained in psychiatry or pastoral counseling. He was just a friend who was willing to walk through those hospital gates with us and sit and eat birthday cake and talk with my dad."

Who are the people in your life that have been your angels? Who can you turn to when you're at your lowest? We all need angels in our lives who will be there no matter what when things seem impossible. They tell us they'll be with us along the way and help us conquer those wild beasts. It's also about us being angels for others and it doesn't take much to be one. It's really about being willing to listen and just to be there.

This Lent don't forget about your angels and, perhaps, being a talking frog for someone especially when the wilderness of life seems insurmountable. Because, as Mark tells us, the angels had the last word. Amen.