With the Greatest of Ease

March 5, 2006 (First Sunday in Lent, Year B)

Genesis 9:8-17 Psalm 25 1 Peter 3:18-22 Mark 1:9-13

A few weeks ago, I was at a folklore symposium at Harvard, attended by current folklore and mythology students as well as alumni like myself. One of my classmates from folk and myth, Montana Miller, came to talk about her experience as a trapeze artist in France and in America.[1] During the question and answer period, Montana vented about the 1956 movie *Trapeze*. No one, Montana told us, *No one* works without a net. Ever. It would be suicide.

The fact is, trapeze artists fall all the time. You are throwing yourself into midair, depending on split-second timing for your partner to be in the right place at just the right time, in order to catch you. So there is always a net. Because you *are* going to fall.

You *are* going to fall.

If you told me this story, this Gospel story that we heard today, and didn't tell me that it was *Jesus*, I'd be likely to say that somebody had a psychotic break. I mean, really, here's a man about 30 years old who goes off to find out about some strange new cult where people are being dunked in the muddy Jordan river by a guy wearing the skin of a dead camel who eats honey-covered grasshoppers and hasn't cut his hair in years.

Suddenly he has a vision – notice, in Mark's gospel, that only Jesus sees the heavens torn apart – a violent and beautiful vision of heaven being torn apart, of a voice calling him God's beloved, of the breath of God, the spirit of God, descending like a dove and then driving him out into the desert.

Jesus didn't stay for coffee hour after the baptism. The spirit *drove* him into the wilderness. This was no gentle dove; this was something out of Hitchcock.

And all Mark says in his terse, taciturn way, is*: He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him*

I'm not saying Jesus was psychotic, although intense religious experiences and some forms of mental illness can be hard to distinguish sometimes, and I have had friends and family who struggled, and sometimes died, from mental illness, suffering from delusions that their mind confused with God.

Jesus wasn't psychotic, though he certainly seems to have wrestled with depression, and he may have questioned his own sanity. The story that Mark, that every gospel, tells, though, is certainly a story of crisis in Jesus' life. *He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him*

When we say that Jesus shared our humanity, we don't just mean that he had arms and legs, we mean that he shared our full humanity, that he was fully human – which meant that he knew loneliness and grief and betrayal as well as exultation and love and joy.

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him

Which brings me back to the trapeze:

Jesus had his crises, but good trapeze artist that he was, he didn't work without a net. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered unto him, waiting on him in the wilderness of his heart.

And Jesus was not a solo trapeze artist (if you will let me carry this conceit further). He worked with women and men, a changing crowd and a faithful core of disciples, Mary and Martha and Peter and James and the rest.

[1] www.montanamiller.com

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There are two roles for trapeze artists: the flyer and the catcher. The flyer leaps out into the air, and the catcher takes hold of her before she falls.

In Jesus' circus, everybody was both. He was the rabbi, the teacher, the coach, yes, but he was the servant, too, who washed their feet, and who surrendered himself to the cross. He was the great flyer of the resurrection, and the great catcher of salvation. Mary and Martha and Peter and James, too, learned to fly – to risk and pray and preach – and learned to catch – to heal and nurture and feed.

What makes a trapeze act work? There is the net. There is the flyer. There is the catcher. And there is gravity.

Without gravity, the trapeze artist would not be able to swing. Leaping off the platform, they would sail straight ahead and into the wall of the bigtop. Gravity, the very thing that endangers them, makes their art possible.

One of the great dangers in comfortable Christianity, the practice of believing in a nice God that is far away and leaves us alone, is that we never *leap*. And in our co-dependency, in our concern about everybody but ourselves, we can stand nervously watching and worrying. But the beautiful act will not work unless there are flyers and catchers; unless the flyers are willing to turn around and catch, and the catchers, the rescuers, the prayers, must be willing to *fly*.

To take hold of the trap, the trapeze bar, and leap into the embrace of gravity.

As I said on Wednesday, there is a surprising joy in Lent. It is the joy of **gravity**, of willingly throwing yourself into the discipline of fasting and repentance, It is the joy of being the *porteur*, the catcher: praying hard for the needs of the world, reaching out to people who are in pain, serving the needs of the world – giving time and money and strength to help others. It is the joy of being the *voltigeur*, the flyer of opening up to God your pain and your strength your grief and your joy your betrayal and your faith, your strength and your sorrow.

Fly and catch, fly and catch. It is the rhythm of Lent, the rhythm of our faith. You cannot choose one or the other; you must choose both, knowing that we will fall, knowing that we will fall and live in the wilderness for days and months or years. Knowing we will fall to the net and be with the wild beasts, and angels will minister to us.

And then we will climb up from the net again, and we will fly and catch, fly and catch, fly and catch.

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