

“Water, Water, Everywhere”

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

February 21, 2021

Genesis 9:8-17 – *“Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”*

Mark 1:9-15 – *“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased. The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

Do you remember the first time you left home? And I don’t mean to go for a sleepover at a friend’s house or to summer camp? No, I’m talking about the first time you left your parent’s home with the expectation of not coming back to live there. Do you recall that day? My guess is that for most of us, the answer is a resounding yes. Those are BIG moments in our lives and, as such, we tend to hold on to the memories.

Personally, I’ll never forget that day. I’d finished culinary school, had a job at a fine dining restaurant in Charlotte that paid me enough to afford the rent at a small house over by the hospital in Dilworth with some roommates. Heck, I’d even bought a bed, a real-honest-to-goodness queen-sized bed, an upgrade from the twin I’d slept in at my parent’s house since I was 10.

But what I remember most is the feeling that a grand adventure was just about to commence. That the future was out there and it was mine for the taking. It was an exhilarating feeling, one tinged with both excitement and fear. The same feeling, I might point out tends to happen just about any time we stand on the edge of making real changes to the routine. It’s the kind of feeling we encounter when we start a new job, when we propose (or are proposed to) by our future spouses. We feel that same energy when we hold our children for the first time. We don’t know quite how it’ll turn out, but we’re energized by the possibilities.

And I can’t help but wonder if, in his humanity, that’s the feeling Jesus experienced as he walked away from Nazareth.

Now look, one of the things that you’ll have to get used to when encountering the gospel of Mark is that the author is something akin to Detective Joe Friday if any of y’all remember him. A fictional character on a TV show called *Dragnet*, his classic line was “just the facts, ma’am.” No time for superfluous information, Mark’s author gets right to the nitty gritty. It’s the reason why in the Gospel of Mark, we cover the same amount of time as it takes either Matthew or Luke to the 3rd or 4th chapter to get to.

In fact, our reading this morning represents our initial introduction to the Gospel’s main character. The preceding verses are about John the Baptist proclaiming Jesus’ coming. And then, immediately following, we get this morning’s reading.

What's interesting to note is that prior to John's announcement of Jesus, 30 years have elapsed in Jesus' life. Mark, along with Matthew, don't mention anything about those years. Luke gives us a few brief snippets but not much to go on. What happened in those years, we wonder and, since he's the Lord and our personal savior, it's an understandable question.

But, like I said, Mark cuts right to the chase.

That expression, by the way, comes to us from the early era of Hollywood. You see, back then, almost all of the movies were comedies. And, being addicted to formulas as Hollywood has always been, each one of those comedies concluding with a hilarious chase scene. When a writer would bog one of these movies down with dialogue or other unnecessary stuff, can't you just hear the producer chastising them, concluding with "cut to the chase?"

Well, that's what Mark does. It isn't that those 30 years of Jesus life weren't interesting, to be sure. But seeing as how the point of all the Gospels is to make Jesus saving work known, that's where all the Gospels choose to put their emphasis on.

In Mark, our first introduction to Jesus is as he leaves his hometown and heads off to a momentous occasion – His baptism by John in the Jordan River. Now we might wonder why Jesus would need to do such a thing. Be baptized that is. After all, Mark's already told us that John's baptism is for "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And, if we know anything about Jesus, we know that Jesus lives a life without sin. So why, we wonder, get baptized.

Well, that's how Mark alerts us early on about what Jesus' has come to do. You see, Jesus undergoes a baptism not for Himself, but for all humanity. Jesus, perfectly faithful to the Father, undergoes this event on behalf of you and I. In a way, Jesus is setting right the sin of Adam, of Eve, and of you and me. On Good Friday, we'll remember with sorrow in our hearts that it is for us that Jesus is crucified. His death our death. His death an atonement for our sins.

Here, Jesus undergoes baptism for us and for our salvation.

The prior 30 years of his earthly life, Jesus has prepared for the events of the next several months. Being fully God, Jesus would've known the events which would transpire with absolute certainty.

We aren't so lucky leaving home, are we? Because for many of us, leaving home represents a gamble, a good one we hope. After all, life in our parent's house might've been easy, relatively stress free. Meals provided, rent paid, a comfortable place to lay our heads at night. But as we forge off into the unknown, we know that as wonderfully as we imagine our future, it might not all go according to plan.

I remember leaving home I had a pretty clear-cut vision of my future. I would work for a while as a chef, learning everything I could along the way and then, when the time was right and my bank account sufficient, I was going to open my own restaurant. Heck, I even starting writing down my recipes in a little blue notebook that lies now somewhere lost in my home.

You see, my life didn't turn out quite the way I imagined it there as I left 4201 Tyndale Avenue Charlotte, North Carolina. Along the way, I confess, I fell prey to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, to say nothing of being tempted by sin and having it cut through me like a knife through hot butter.

Jesus, we know, following his baptism, was immediately led out into the wilderness. Again, notice how brief Mark is there with his description of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Whereas Matthew and Luke give us dialogue between Satan and Jesus, Mark is conspicuously silent.

Absent from Mark's telling of Jesus' temptation in the Wilderness is actual dialogue between our Lord and the lord of darkness. Mark leaves that up to our imagination. Which, in a way, is helpful to a degree. What do I mean by that? Well, sometimes we think that it's only with the big things that the devil tempts us. Things like cheating on our spouse to satisfy our lust or robbing a bank to get rich quick or stabbing a colleague in the back to climb the next rung of the corporate ladder. And while these things do, in fact happen, most of our temptations are of a much lower gravity. That makes them, of course, easier to succumb to.

C.S. Lewis, in a book called *The Screwtape letters*, makes what I think is a vital point. Now the book is the correspondence of an arch demon to a new underling. A demon who has just started out in the business of luring souls away from God. What Screwtape tells his young protégé is that it doesn't matter how big or how small the temptation is, anything that leads people further from God, even just an inch, will do. The primrose path, if you will.

So no, we might not be tempted to cheat on our taxes, but what about a little gossip here and there? We might not be led to injure the people who we perceived have harmed us, but a little so-called justified anger will do the same thing.

So, like I said, the silence of Mark on the actual ways in which Jesus is tempted helps us understand that temptation to stray from God can come in a billion different forms, each individualized to the person.

There was a movie, years ago with Keanu Reeves and Al Pacino. “The Devil’s Own” I believe is the name of it. In Pacino plays the devil and he’s trying to lure Keanu’s character into following him. Ultimately, he fails. But the final scene of the movie is quite telling. A beautiful reporter fawns over what Keanu has accomplished. The come on is obvious but her words are so highly praiseworthy, Keanu opens the door for her to talk with him further. The final scene is that woman morphing back into Pacino, the devil. He says, “vanity gets them every time.”

It’s a chilling moment for a final scene. But its’ truth is one we must keep in our minds.

Unassisted by God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, that’s exactly what happens to us. We give in. Whether the temptation is large or small, it is just our human broken nature to be led astray. But thanks be to God, we aren’t left to our own devices. God is with us, always, until the end of the age, that’s what the Bible says.

We know the wilderness is a wild place, filled with inhospitalities and even wild animals waiting to devour us. It can be quite a scary place. Or it would be, if we were not joined with along the way by God. Our strong fortress, our solid rock, our sword and our shield. That’s why baptism is so significant for us. In that moment where the water touches our heads, the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, dwells in our hearts. Though the wilderness may frighten us, remembering our baptism allows us the fortitude to know that it will, in the end, all be all right.

In fact, although the wilderness scares us, it’s where we really learn the depth and richness of our faith. In the first book of the Game of Thrones series, one of Ned Stark young sons asks him if it is possible to be brave when you’re afraid. The wizened warrior answers his son, “that’s the only time a man can be brave, when he’s afraid.”

And that’s why the wilderness, even though it’s scary, even though it’s dangerous and filled with temptations and other things that can harm us is so necessary for our spiritual development. For it is only when our faith is challenged, truly stretched thin that we learn that it can sustain us, even as we walk through the shadow of the valley of death.

Being a pastor, it’s been my great blessing to have met scores of wonderful, faithful Christians. And I can’t help but notice a commonality. Each one of these Christians has had times of great difficulty in their lives.

I remember one woman in particular. I began visiting her when I worked for River Hills Community Church. She was 91 when I met her and was living in an assisted living facility. I’d head over and, invariably her tortoise-shelled cat would jump up on me and sit on my lap as we chatted. What I came to learn about this remarkable woman is that she’d undergone some truly difficult things. To begin with, she’d lived through the Depression as a young girl. Things didn’t get easier from there as she encountered other difficulties, tragedies even, ranging from the sudden loss of a child to a horrible car wreck that left another one of her children permanently brain damaged.

But she has a phrase she kept using, even as she would share her past troubles. “God’s been so good to me,” she kept saying. Well, to me, it sure didn’t seem that way. So, one day, I asked her – “how has God been so good to you?” She looked at me like I was crazy. As if I ought to know. After all, I was the pastor. She said, with a smile on her face humoring me, do doubt, “He never once left my side. He was always there when I needed him. Always.”

That woman learned something about God, about her faith, didn’t she? But she didn’t encounter it in the warm confines of safety, of good times. No, she learned about the wonders of faith in the wilderness.

Remembering our quote from Game of Thrones, perhaps it could be that the only way one can be truly changed by God is in the wilderness. For it’s there, making our way through the worst of times we come to see the gentle and guiding hand of God, marking our way and protecting our steps.

And, knowing this, we simply must proclaim the goodness of our God.

That's what Jesus does. Having survived the wilderness Jesus ministry to the world begins in earnest. Coming into Galilee, Jesus announces, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*"

In the course of 8 short verses, Jesus has left home, gotten baptized, been joined by the Holy Spirit, survived the wilderness and the temptations of the Devil and NOW he begins His proclamation. His sharing of the Good News with the world.

May the same be true for us.

Because you see, as we come into Lent, we're called by the very voice of God away from home, away from our comfort zones. Called away from the patterns and the routines which have made up our ordinary lives. We leave those creature comforts to be marked by the Holy Spirit. That's why under normal conditions, we take the sign of the cross in ashes on our heads on Ash Wednesday. We undergo that ritual as a means to signify a beginning.

From there, we too are whisked by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Only it's not a literal wilderness, but it is nevertheless wild and scary to examine our lives closely. And, I wonder, is there any place more psychologically frightening than that? After all, in Lent, we're called to look upon our own lives, not so much as the hero of the story, but rather the villain. We're called to seek out where we ourselves are going wrong. Where we ourselves are hurting people with our selfishness our envy or our pride.

Now, make no mistake about it, that's tough work. Scary stuff. And it's in that dreadful encounter with the worst of who we are that we are sure to be tempted to take the easier, softer way. After all, laying off chocolate or fast food is much easier than doing the hard work of Lenten discipline and self-exploration. Not that such undertakings are bad or wrong, mind you, rather that they can be used to provide a false sense of doing something helpful to our faith. No, the work of Lent is self-discovery, of change. If it can be done solely by fasting or quitting social media, wonderful. But chances are it'll take more than that to prepare us for the glories of Easter.

How will we know if we've done enough?

Well, emerging from the wilderness and experiencing the joy of Easter as those cleansed by Christ and awaiting his return, we simply can't help but share the Gospel. There is, in fact, Good News for sinners.

The mark by which we know we've truly changed, that we've truly been led by God through these long 40 days of Lent is how we encounter the world, post-Easter Sunday. Are we grateful? Do we see how in the good times and in the bad times, God has always been with us? Do we share the name of Jesus more easily with those around us who as of yet do not believe?

Friends, my sense is that right now, the world, heck America even, needs real Christians. Not the kind who just trudge to church each and every Sunday out of a sense of duty or habit. Rather we need the kind of Christians who put their backs into it. Who work hard at the real mission of the church – making disciples of all the nations, baptizing the sin-sick, the desperate, the lonely? And teaching them everything that the Lord has taught us.

I fully believe that if each and every one of us take this journey of Lent, from the comforts of where we're at, into the great unknown spiritual wilderness, we will emerge from it energized, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Friends, we will change the world. Turn it upside down. We will feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, give sight to the blind. We will reach this nation hell-bent on self-destruction in a new and amazing way.

But it will only happen if we take those first few steps away from the comforts of home. Away from the patters and routines which make up our regular life and into the wilderness of self-examination and the changes which will follow. Only happen when our voices take up the call of Jesus shouting from the rooftops of our lives, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*"

In the name of that Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.