## Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all contain accounts of Jesus' time in the wilderness, but Mark tells the story a bit differently than the other two. The difference might, at first glance, seem insignificant but I think it reflects a very deliberate choice on the part of Mark, because of his understanding of the story. Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was baptized by John then led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. But Mark says that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the place where he would spend 40 days facing temptation. There is no break between the two events in Mark; you get the sense that the water of the Jordan might still be dripping off Jesus' brow when the Spirit grabs him and pushes him into the desert. Baptism and wilderness time are thus closely linked in Mark. When Jesus' head goes beneath the river water, when he emerges to see a dove above him and to hear God's voice call him Beloved, his baptism is no inoculation from the trials of life or the fate that awaits Jesus at the end of his ministry.

Rather, Jesus' baptism unites him with the Father and the Spirit and prepares him for the tough ministry that lies before him. The forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness bring him face to face with the forces of evil which tempt him to give up his mission and to seek short-term glory in exchange for long-term faithfulness to God's call for him. In fact, Jesus' time of testing is just beginning when he emerges after 40 days of fighting evil, for he learns about the arrest of his dear friend just as he begins his public ministry and his call to “Repent and believe in the good news.” Jesus will be questioned, rejected, ridiculed, tortured and killed before his mission is accomplished, but his baptism and wilderness testing seem to have created in him the resolve he needs to go forward into the fray. The wheels of salvation have begun to turn and nothing, not even the greatest powers of his day, can stop Jesus now.

When you and I are baptized, we are baptized into the baptism of Jesus, into his life, death and resurrection. When I speak with new parents who want to get their babies baptized, I sometimes get the feeling that they are looking for some kind of protection for their children, sort of like the vaccinations they get to keep them from getting certain diseases. If they can get their children baptized quickly enough, they hope they can inoculate them from anything bad happening to them. I understand this urge – the wish of parents to protect their children from harm. Most mothers and fathers would do anything to keep their children from suffering. But our baptism, even when we bring infants to the font, is far from protection from the evils of the world. Our baptism is the way in which God claims us as God's own, names us God's beloved, promises to accompany us on life's journey and to welcome us into eternal life when this life ends. In the meantime, baptism prepares us for our mission as the people of God, our call to, in the words of our baptismal service, “proclaim Christ through our words and actions, to care for others and the world God has made and to work for justice and peace.” In baptism, we get no guarantees that we will be protected from the forces of evil in this world, no promises that life will be easy. Instead, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ for our whole lives; we are welcomed into God's family and given a purpose: to witness to the love of God in Christ for all people.

Then we are pushed into the wilderness, where we face our own kind of temptation. Temptation to put Jesus on the back burner and embrace the values of the culture around us. Temptation to get what we can for ourselves and let others worry about their own needs. Temptation to throw up our hands at the dysfunction of our communities, our nation and our world as being too great for us to face. Temptation to think that lowered flags and promises of thoughts and prayers will be enough for parents of slaughtered children. Temptation to convince ourselves that if certain people only worked harder, they could have everything they need. Temptation to accept that women do not deserve the same respect and opportunities taken for granted by men. Temptation to pretend that peace is achieved through might, through threats and through war. The writer Harry Williams describes our temptation this way: “And so we are tempted of Satan, tempted to give up, to despair. Tempted to cynicism. Tempted to cruelty. Tempted not to help others when we know we can, because, we think, what's the use? Tempted to banish from our life all that we hold most dear, and that is love, tempted to lock ourselves up, so that when we pass by people feel, 'There goes a dead man.' And behind each and all of these temptations is the temptation to disbelieve in what we are, the temptation to distrust ourselves, to deny that it is the Spirit himself which beareth witness with our spirit. God in us.”

These forty days of Lent give us the chance to reclaim our identity as the body of Christ placed in the middle of a broken world for a purpose: to do all that we can to share the love of Christ with our neighbors. This time gives us the opportunity to believe in who and what we are, in whose we are, to trust in what God has made us, to celebrate that the Spirit itself lives in us and bears witness with our spirit. Our Lenten study, called “Faces of Christ,” will immerse us in the biblical portraits of Jesus. It will remind us of his willingness to give everything he has in order to love us for all eternity. Our study will show us how to see the face of Christ in our neighbors, near and far and how to serve them. We will have the chance to put our faith into action by choosing one or all of the ELCA's World Hunger projects, which seek in very specific ways to take God's love to those who so need it.

As it was for Jesus, 40 days is only the beginning. For us, it is a time of reflection and rededication. This time gives us the chance to remember our baptism and the way in which it immerses us in the dangers and the rewards of ministry in the name of the one sent to save us all.

Amen.

*Lent 1B*

*February 18, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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