

## First Sunday in Lent – Year B - 2021

If you think you heard today's Gospel not long ago, your memory is not failing you. We heard Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus the very first Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany. And here it is again. But on the other occasion – the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord – the portion we heard ended with the Voice coming from the cloud: "You are my Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Today – we hear more. Today we hear that *immediately* after that Voice declared Jesus as Beloved, the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness. He spent 40 days there, tested by Satan, with wild beasts around him and angels who served him. And *after John was arrested* – Jesus went *back* to Galilee where he had come from and began to proclaim the good news of God: "The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent – and believe in the good news."

There are all kinds of "signifiers" in this gospel passage – language that is meant to point us to other things. The heavens being torn apart is a sign that something has dramatically changed. Think of the temple curtain torn at the time of the death of Jesus, or Elisha tearing his garment when Elijah was taken into heaven.

In the context of today's first reading – where God establishes a covenant with Noah – and with all of creation – this rending of the heavens, the Spirit's descent, is another sign in the sky – like the rainbow – showing us the *new* covenant in Jesus. And what's new about it is this: Under that early covenant, the people saw their bond with God as dependent upon their behavior. If they followed the rules, God would favor them. If they disobeyed, if they were unfaithful, then God would punish them. We heard that in today's Psalm: "All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." But when Jesus emerges from the water, when the heavens are torn apart, the voice of God speaks *being -not behavior*. God tells us who we are, not what we have done or what we must do. Yes, something has changed dramatically.

But of course, the story does not end there.

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Not as punishment – but as the place where we all must go to do some serious soul-searching, as a movement from one part of life to another as we see in the Native American vision quest tradition. The use of the term "wilderness" was another *signifier* – hearkening

back to the Exodus, to the prophets in the wilderness. A place for deepening intimacy as God spoke through the Prophet Hosea “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband.' ...And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.” Those are the reasons we are led into the wilderness – to learn the *ways* of God, and to deepen our *relationship* with God.

Mark continues: “Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” 40 days - as Noah and all the inhabitants were in the ark while it rained for 40 days and nights. And as the people of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years.

And that’s how we end up here, spending 40 days in the season of Lent – where we, too, are invited into the wilderness. Mark does not tell us what sort of temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness. But I think the biggest temptation *we* face is to forget the Voice that Jesus heard, and that we heard at our *own* baptisms: You are my Beloved. God is with us, and we are Beloved.

We can look at the 40 years the people of Israel spent in the desert after leaving Egypt, and the 40 days Noah and his family and all the animals spent in the ark, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness as *signs* pointing us to the truth that in these times set aside, these times spent in the wilderness of a desert or the isolation of a flood or pandemic, God is *with* us there. And though there may be wild beasts present, angels are present also.

We are indeed called into the wilderness – to come to know fully who we are – the Beloved of God. And to come to understand that God sees us that way – not dependent on our behavior, but dependent on our very *being* – which is that we are of God, all of us, and all of creation. Nothing we do or don’t do will change that.

It is a sea change, this revelation of God – that God loves us without condition. That is the “good news of God” that Jesus preached with his life. It is what we long for, for ourselves, but don’t find easy to extend to others.

It may be that the biggest “repentance” – the biggest CHANGE of heart we have to make is a change in our perspective – a change in the way we look at things – in the way we see ourselves, in the ways we look at others, and in the ways we see God.

For that is what the word “repent” means here in this gospel passage, when it says, “Repent and believe the good news.” It is more “metanoia” – a change in heart that changes how I live. We are asked to *live* as if we really *believed* the good news that the time has come *now* when GOD’s way is *the* way we should all live.

I was struck, as I sat with the litany that we prayed this morning – with words so artfully written by our deacon emeritus Nancy set to Moonyeen’s music – that so many of the things we prayed God to do are things that God is most likely waiting for us, calling us to do:

That you might bring an end to violence in our home and communities,  
and to wars throughout the world:

That you might show mercy on prisoners, the homeless, the hungry,  
the lonely and all who are abused, oppressed, or neglected:

That you might teach us to walk gently on this fragile earth  
you have given into our stewardship:

That you might teach us true repentance for our sins,  
and soften our hearts to forgive those who have injured us:

That you might hold in your loving arms the ill and the dying,  
and strengthen those who love them and care for them:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The temptation is to deny the Spirit – to deny the voice that names us Beloved – To deny God in us.

And an equal temptation is to deny that God has spoken those words – You are my Beloved – to *everyone*. So I asked myself: What if we each spent these 40 days in the wilderness of Lent learning to look *with the eyes of God* at *all* that God has breathed into being, at *each person* in front of us or in our mind’s eye? To look with LOVE?

In the listening we are going to practice this Lent, thanks to our *Living Well Through Lent* booklets, what if we sat in stillness and listened to God say to each person that came to our minds, “You are my Beloved,”? What if we practiced saying to the people we are struggling to love, in the stillness of our prayer, “You are God’s beloved,”?

At our baptisms – we entered into a covenant with God no less powerful than God’s covenant with Noah – wherein God proclaimed us to be God’s own – Beloved. We have these glorious 40 days of lent to spend listening to the voice of God within us, and around us, in whatever wilderness in which we find ourselves – and there seem plenty to go around. May we be open to whatever grace we most need during these days, that we might grow more able and willing to change our hearts so as to change our lives – so we can indeed believe, *really* believe, the good news of God’s kingdom come – believe it enough that we might dare to live it.

May it be so.

- [Genesis 9:8-17](#)
- [1 Peter 3:18-22](#)
- [Mark 1:9-15](#)
- [Psalm 25:1-9](#)