

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

As I read our scripture passages, and looked at various commentaries, for this morning, I could not help but notice some parallels. For example, consider the watery nature of our flood story in Genesis, and the Jesus baptized in the water of the Jordan. Then in 1st Peter, Noah and those with him in the ark, were saved through water and this is linked to baptism. And of course in the flood story and in life, a person can drown in water, but in baptism, water and the Spirit bring new birth, new life. The rainbow in our first lesson is God's reminder that he has established a covenant between himself and every living creature on the earth, and I when I do or see a baptism I am reminded of the Spirit hovering over the waters of creation, and the new creation, the new life, the new covenant in baptism and I can almost see a rainbow over the water in our baptismal font.

Jesus is baptized and as he is coming up from the water, the Spirit descends and a voice from heaven proclaims "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Then the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where temptations and wild beasts await. In a way, the same thing happens to us. We are baptized and sooner or later we are driven into the wilderness. We would like to think that if we are baptized then we are immune to the dangers of the wilderness, but that is not the case. Baptism is not magic and though we are washed in the waters of our baptism, we are then sent into the wilderness, the dirt and the grime, the mud of everyday life. I should explain that the word we translate as wilderness from the Greek does not necessarily mean desert, it means any place where people are not, a deserted or desolate place. Now I have been in fair number of wildernesses over the years from spending time in the Bob Marshall wilderness in Montana, to the forests and bogs of northern Minnesota, to the swamps and bogs in southern Maryland.

I have also been in the wilderness we come to on our own, often a desolate place. I do not think I was driven by the Spirit to any of the actual wilderness experiences I have had, but I have often wondered if perhaps a major wilderness experience I arrived at on my own was somehow driven by the Spirit. I suspect it was because God sends us in to the wilderness as surely as he sent Israel during the Exodus, as surely as Jesus was sent into the wilderness. I remember going through a few nights of wondering what I was doing, did I really want to quit my job, uproot my wife from our home in northern California, leave our son and his family, to say nothing of our friends and our church home, and head to only God knew where? It was certainly about as wild a wilderness experience as I have had and the temptation was certainly there to play it safe, to remain home in comfort, to not put myself and my nearest and dearest at risk. Was it necessary? I think it was, because a wilderness experience never leaves a person unchanged.

Now I note that the Spirit descended upon Jesus, propelled him into the wilderness, yet at that same time continued to minister to him. In my own wilderness experience after a night or two (maybe three) of tossing and turning, wrestling

apparently with myself, I ended up feeling both drawn into and comforted into continuing to step out in faith. I suspect many of you have gone through something similar during your lifetimes. If you have not, perhaps you will.

Mark next provides the setting as he notes that after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee. So what did Jesus do there? Why, he proclaimed the gospel, the good news of God, Jesus the good news proclaiming the good news, or you might say good news from God made known in Jesus Christ. Again we see a parallel as our gospel writer shows that the gospel is proclaimed in adversity and suffering, not just in ease or comfort. This is important to you and I today because our lessons this morning describe our own lives. We all have our wilderness experiences and we live in a wilderness. I do not mean literally so much even though there are floods and wild beasts, to say nothing of storms that rip through our area and our lives. No, I am thinking more of the trials and temptations that we face each day, the imprisonment of sin and resultant guilt that we can feel from our actions or from our inactions.

Our lessons are familiar, so familiar that sometimes we appreciate the stories, the imagery, even the parallels, but we fail to realize that there are deeper levels in each of them. Our scripture readings this morning use imagery to show our relationship with God, to remind us of God's covenant with us. Floods and baptism, rainbows and baptism, new birth and baptism, the Holy Spirit in baptism and with us in all times, including times of trial and temptation.

God's covenant is with all creation and he says never again so that even in our wildernesses, those we arrive at on our own, or otherwise, never again will we be left alone. God is in the wilderness, Jesus has been there, done that, as they say. We may sometimes feel lost and bereft, but the Holy Spirit knows where we are. Knowing firsthand from my own wilderness experience as well as scripture, I know that the Spirit can drive our life experiences even in the loneliest of times, even when we are strongly tempted to simply give in to whatever is assailing us, whether we arrive there on our own or not. But remember God is in the wilderness and God can call us through our wilderness experience because Jesus says the time is fulfilled and we are filled through our baptisms with the Holy Spirit and it is time to focus on Christ's promise of what is to come.

This past Wednesday we were marked with the cross of Christ, the same cross that was placed on our foreheads in baptism was traced in ashes. Ashes that remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But we are not abandoned because even in that reminder, God is there, no matter how frightening the future might look no matter how difficult our foray into the wildernesses of life have been and will be again, God is there. We go with courage, not alone, we go into the wilderness that God transforms even as we, by grace through faith are transformed.

AMEN