

February 22, 2015, First Sunday in Lent  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Mark 1:9-15

### **What You're Baptized For**

Lent begins with a wilderness gospel. We're back at the beginning of the gospel of Mark today, beginning with Jesus' baptism, which is the first time in this gospel that God calls Jesus the Beloved Son. The announcement comes just after Jesus comes up out of the water, and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. Today, we hear that, and then we hear what happens next. Which is to say, on the first Sunday in Lent we hear what baptism is for. Or rather, where.

It's for the wilderness. That's where Jesus goes next, for forty days.

It's a place and a number rife with Biblical resonance. Forty—like the forty days when the rain did not stop, while Noah, and his family, and beasts of all kinds, bobbed along on a wilderness of water. Forty—like the forty years the Israelites wandered after their Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. The wilderness, that's where Jesus goes after he's baptized, staying there for forty day—forty days, like Lent. That's what comes after baptism. That's what you're baptized for, for the wilderness, for Lent.

As a season, as a religious concept, Lent has a fair amount of baggage. It's not usually thought of as a term or a time that attracts great excitement, or joy: "Ooh! Lent!" We heard some of the different senses about Lent in the Children's sermon last week, including how Lent can have a somewhat negative sense. I think that the children often speak for adults. When asked to define Lent, one of the children said, "Lent is the time in church when we are all sad." Lent makes one of my grown-up friends sad, she had a very negative impression of Lent for years. She was raised in a grim sort of a church—an experience that left her with very negative sense about organized religion. Now, as an adult, she is learning something else about what it means to be a Christian. But for years she heard the word Lent and felt dread and fear.

"Wilderness" as a word doesn't fare much better. It doesn't often invite eagerness, enthusiasm. It's not an easy place to be. The wilderness is a place where water is hard to find and food is scarce. Things aren't marked, there are no roads or maps and its filled with beasts. And it's in the wilderness, after all, where Jesus is tempted by the Devil. We heard that today, too. In fact, we hear it every year the first Sunday in Lent, whether it's the version of this wilderness story that is told by Matthew, or Mark, or Luke. Every year, the Lent begins with a gospel in the wilderness with an encounter with Satan. Maybe that's really what makes the wilderness sound ominous. It's a place where diabolical temptations threaten your existence and identity. It's a place where you can wander around, not knowing where, or who, you are.

In fact, that's just what the Israelites did after their liberating exodus from slavery in Egypt. Notably, that wilderness story also begins with a route through water. The Red Sea parted and the children of Israel passed right through its baptismal walls. And where did they go? To the wilderness, where they wandered around trying to figure out where they were, trying to figure out who they were. They were tempted, many times, and many times they fell short. In fact, they spent a lot of the time whining. They missed their past. Yes, their enslaved past, they missed it, and moaned about their present, their wilderness present, for forty years.

That's a long time to whine. Still, I do have empathy for the children of Israel. Maybe it has to do with now being forty myself... Or maybe my empathy stems from knowing what it is to look back, to something in the past, something that seemed better back then, seemed easier, even though maybe it wasn't actually all that...

Forty years ago, wasn't that when everyone went to church every Sunday? Wasn't that

when everyone always got along? Back then, wasn't church easy?

I rather doubt that being a church was easy back then, any back then. I rather doubt being a church is ever easy—or that it should be. The Lenten gospel begins in the wilderness, and ends at the cross.

The wilderness of Lent, the wilderness of life, is not easy. It can and should have a sense of sadness to it, for it includes serious reflection about all the ways we fall short, as individuals and as a community. So, yes, Lent is the time in church when we are all sad, because Lent calls us to acknowledge our shortcomings, the ways that we treat one another which grieve God's Holy Spirit.

And yes, so also the wilderness is not easy. It calls for self-examination. It can be disorienting. It includes temptations. You might wonder where you will find with your next meal. But the wilderness is also the place to which we are right now. And it's God who has put us here.

God did. That's in the gospel reading, too. Did you hear that? Did you hear that word, that surprising attribution, that undeniable detail about why Jesus went to the wilderness? The Spirit drove him! The Spirit! Drove! Apparently the Holy Spirit had a car. In all seriousness, the Spirit drives Jesus to that place, because that's what he's been baptized for.

We're not baptized for something easy. We're baptized for a place, for a time, that is the wilderness, a place that can bring out our inner beasts. We've probably all experienced a very challenging situation, something that prompted people to fight like cats and dogs. But the wilderness doesn't have to be like that. The wilderness can also be the place where our identity and purpose are clarified and claimed. Isn't that what the wilderness did for Jesus? Look how he came out of it, clear as bell about he was and what he was to do, proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The wilderness challenges us to confront our temptations. We can face what it is about ourselves that we need to change, and come out the experience clearer, stronger, better aligned with God's good news. The wilderness challenges us to the better angels of our natures. The wilderness challenges us to take this time, maybe for forty days, maybe more, and treat one another in different ways. We can wait on one another like the angels waited on Jesus, we can share food together, even in the wilderness.

And, as we do so, the wilderness challenges, the wilderness offers us, the chance to leave the whining behind. That's what it did for the children of Israel. After their time in the wilderness, they left behind a mindset, even a generation, of complacency, and despondency. They became a people led into in a new and promised land. That's what the wilderness was for the Israelites.

That's what it can be for us. We all have our own wildernesses, our own places of uncertainty, and hunger, and danger. Our wilderness can be a place of peril, and of possibility. It's a place where we need to figure out who we are, which is to recognize who we are in God's sight: we are God's beloved children, and we can learn to see others in just that way as well.

That is what Lent is for, that is what we are baptized for, to live into our identity as God's beloved children. Lent is a time to recognize what God does for us, in and through the wilderness—and that is not sad, that is incredibly exciting, that bring us to great joy! We are right where we need to be, right now, and it is a glorious time. It's why, it's for where, it's for what, we are baptized.