

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
February 18, 2018

First Sunday in Lent
Text: St. Mark 1:9-15
Theme: Surprisingly Satisfied

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, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe the good news."

In Nomine Jesu

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I'm from Minnesota! "Ya sure... believe what good news?" Or, "Hey, what's so good about that news you bring?"

I guess it's just like us to murmur and complain like that. You'd think, hearing our questions, that we were just like those Hebrew slaves wandering in the wilderness. It's just like the old temptation for Adam and Eve, suckered by a snake into believing that we are missing out on something big when we depend solely on God ... when we "let God be God."

When we act that way, devilish thoughts plant a sense of "lack" and "want" and "that's not enough" in our guts. And there's hardly anything worse than that for us whose closets bulge with stuff we thought would make us happy. You think that's not the case? Some of the biggest real estate profit investments of the past decade have been self-storage space ... for the stuff our stuffed closets and garages and crawl spaces can't contain. And still we want MORE."

One blogger puts it this way: "It's the rich people trying to sell you stuff you don't need by selling you an image of a life you'll never have." And that's precisely a reverse image of the wilderness in our text – which, itself, is just a symbol of our usually carefully hidden dry, barren existence; a rocky, crusty, deadly sea of scarcity even as we drown deep over our heads in an ocean of plenty.

Here's what I think. I think our obsession with this kind of mirage is born of "fear." And fear leads to hoarding. In a dog-eat-dog world, the strong get more while the weak get less. Just think about the sharp contrast this Gospel's writer makes between the beastly "abundance" of Herod's perverse birthday bash, between the scribes who love to have the places of honor at banquets, and the dire "poverty" of the very widows whose homes and lives they "devour."

And here we see again a growing gulf in the US between the 1% and the 99% ... even if those percentages press reality to the limits. I was tempted to say "OK, I'm part of the 1% in major metrics, but I'm way at the bottom of that 1%. Yet I've been known to enjoy and offer lots of self-serving parties. And I know we also live relatively opulent lives compared to many in the global community around us!

And I still think that behind it all is our fear of death, especially a cross-bound, god-forsaken one. Just look at the great temptation for Jesus to avoid his own cross when Peter takes him aside and rebukes him. Just remember Jesus' own distressful agitation and agonizing prayer in the garden that shows how tempting Peter's words had been, despite Jesus' initial rebuttal. Never let us think it was "easy" – for whatever reason – for Jesus to die upon that cross when he prayed to the Father three times to "remove this cup from me."

And our own fear of dying and our own avoidance of any cross we can in our lives is just as much a part of these forty days of Lent as they were for Jesus.

Remember that wilderness in our text? It's a hot, dry, withering, harsh, hard, rocky, cruel, and deadly place for those who "go it alone." And God's judgment is more scathing still, says the prophet Isaiah [a favorite of this writer and of Jesus' own parabolic cursing of a fig tree – "withered to its roots"]. If you have ears to hear, listen. Its' got nothing to do with trees and everything to do with those who "have no faith in God."

So let's get back to that scene beside the Jordan river ... Jesus is there. God's Spirit is there. I want you to notice something. God didn't put a protective shield around God's beloved Son. No way! No sooner does God declare Jesus "my son, the beloved," than that Holy Spirit "drives" him out into the very deadly wilderness in which we live. And that word for "drive" is the same exceptionally forceful, muscular verb used for God "driving" Adam out of the Garden, for Jesus "driving out" the unclean spirits in exorcism after exorcism, and for Jesus "driving out" those who were buying and selling in the temple at Jerusalem.

Just picture a peasant farmer goading a reluctant animal forward with a stick. Or better yet, the scapegoat being driven out into the wilderness on Yom Kippur (the Hebrew "Day of Atonement"). On that holiest of days, the high priest would lay both hands on a God-selected he-goat to transfer to him the sins of all the people and then have him driven out to the wilderness to expel those sins from God's community. [In which image, of course, John the Baptist words might better be: Jesus is the "goat of God who takes away the sins of the world."]

By Jesus' submitting to a baptism meant for sinners only, the sins of all the people are laid on Jesus by his Father's own hand. And then, Jesus is "driven out" into our wilderness.

Here again, though, comes God's great reversal. Miraculously, just like in the wilderness of Sinai – that place of certain death becomes an amazing place of life because God is there. Jesus is "ministered to" by the angels. That means he's fed with food from heaven and taken care of by God. And already here we have a clear indication of the final outcome.

Jesus will successfully resist temptation, surrender to the cross for us and for our salvation, and be raised by God for his faithful obedience to God's will. Already here in the temptation of our Lord, God's ultimate victory in Christ is assured. And that's the good news for us. Remember the questions that we began with today? – "Believe what good news?" "What's so good about the news you bring?" Jesus is God-in-the-flesh running to our rescue in the very broken world in which we live.

And whatever our needs might be in that broken world, Jesus satisfies those most pressing ones. Think of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 and the 4,000. They're the exact opposite of Herod's beastly, head-chopping, drunken brawls for a select few of his hand-picked cronies ... the exact opposite of the scribal predators devouring the widows' houses.

When Jesus is the host, it's the miracle of manna in the wilderness all over again, yet even better than before. Jesus feeds both Jews and Gentiles from what looks like a very meager meal ... first five loaves and two small fish, then seven loaves and a few fish, finally a naked body hanging on Calvary's cross. And yet, we hear in Mark that all ate and were filled. And that word means "gorged," "absolutely sated," belly bulging/turkey-day-stuffed-to-the-gills full."

There's no way we could over-state the blessedness in all of this for first-century subsistence farmers of ... for once ... being totally full. The good news of such a magnificent fullness out of such a meager start can chase away even our fears, if only we will let it, and replace them all with faith. The good news of such a magnificent fullness out of such a meager start can even help us face our deaths and crosses, both the big one and the little ones.

It's this very miracle we experience week after week at the table of our Lord when we see it for what it truly is – the bread of life, the cup of salvation, a foretaste of the feast to come. Christians don't throw "pity parties"; they throw "Eucharistic feasts" that passionately feed on the body and blood of Christ's promise and then ... well, then they "go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

Which leads us back to that “servant ministry” roll to which our baptisms call us especially in Lent. It implies hands-on help, the waiting of tables, actual physical assistance to those in need. Although it’s always a temptation for us, disciples of Jesus don’t obsess over our lack of things and our scarcity of resources. Rather, trusting that God will provide everything that we need for this body and life, we use whatever we do have to bring the good news of Jesus Christ in real, practical ways to others.

You see, we don’t get a new set of “laws” from Jesus, we get a new “life” – vigorously led by the Spirit. And although the Spirit of Christ may lead us to and through a cross [and maybe many of our own], in the end we are lifted up, raised, filled, and totally satisfied.

I hope you get it. This is the movement from the ashes of Ash Wednesday through the passion of our Lord to his death and his resurrection to the flames of Pentecost. It’s the very transformation that takes place in our lives as we are plunged deep over our heads in the waters of baptism and are raised to the abundance of Christ’s grace again and always.

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN!

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Soli Deo Gloria