**Weekend of Sunday, February 18, 2024**

**1st Sunday in Lent /Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Genesis 9:8-17**

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22**

**Gospel Reading: Mark 1:9-15**

**Sermon Title: *“The Beginning of a Lenten Journey of Renewal”***

**Theme**

*The third covenant in this year’s Lenten readings is the central one of Israel’s history: the gift of the law to those God freed from slavery. The commandments begin with the statement that because God alone has freed us from the powers that oppressed us, we are to let nothing else claim first place in our lives. When Jesus throws the merchants out of the temple, he is defending the worship of God alone and rejecting the ways commerce and profit-making can become our gods. The Ten Commandments are essential to our baptismal call: centered first in God’s liberating love, we strive to live out justice and mercy in our communities and the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Genesis 9:8-17**

8God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22**

18Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

**Gospel: Mark 1:9-15**

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”  
  
 12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.  
  
 14Now 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.”

**Sermon**

As we embark on this sacred season of Lent, we are called to journey alongside Jesus into the wilderness, to confront our deepest temptations, and to emerge renewed in our faith. Knowing that He has overcome and is journeying with us, He gives us the power to overcome too. Today, our focus will be on the Gospel of Mark, where we witness Jesus’s baptism and subsequent journey into the wilderness. Within these verses lies a profound invitation for us to embrace our baptism into Christ Jesus and to walk faithfully through the Lenten wilderness, emerging transformed by the grace of God.

MAP1

In the Gospel Reading, we encounter the momentous occasion of Jesus’s baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, at Bethany Beyond the Jordan. There are two Bethanys in scripture. There is the Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha made their home. Jesus likely used their home in Bethany as his home base during the week we call Holy Week. And then there is Bethany Beyond the Jordan which is only 17 miles away, but as the name indicates, it is on the other side, the east side of the Jordan River in the present-day country of Jordan.

PIC1

I did not go to Bethany Beyond the Jordan because I didn’t have a visa for Jordan. Another reason is because, as I understand it, the water there is disgusting and no one wants to do a baptismal affirmation there. Nevertheless, there is a tourist site at the place where Jesus was baptized.

Back to the story, as Jesus emerges from the waters, the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit descends upon Him like a dove. Then, a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased." According to Mark’s account, it is difficult to know whether anyone else heard the voice.

This baptismal scene serves as a pivotal moment in Jesus’s earthly ministry, marking the beginning, the inauguration of His public proclamation of the Kingdom of God. It is also a profound revelation of Jesus’s identity as the beloved Son of God, anointed by the Spirit for the mission of the redemption of the world.

As followers of Christ, our own baptismal journey is intimately connected to Jesus’s baptism. According to the Apostle Paul, in Romans 6, through the waters of baptism, we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection, symbolizing our dying to sin and rising to newness of life. Just as Jesus was affirmed as the beloved Son of God, so too are we adopted as beloved children of God, and heirs to the promise of salvation.

MAP1

Following his baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where He spends forty days being tempted by Satan. This period of testing in the wilderness echoes the Israelites' forty years of wandering and serves as a symbolic representation of the trials and tribulations we encounter in our own lives.

PIC2

There is a mountain that is regarded as the site of Jesus’s Temptation named Mount Quarantine after the 40 days Jesus was there, or sometimes more simply, Mount of Temptation. Of course, there is a monastery built there. Israel is very successful at irrigation and so a lot of crops are grown in the plains below the mountain. In Jesus’s day, the mountain and the surrounding territory would have been quite inhospitable.

Mark doesn’t go into the details of Jesus’s temptations in the wilderness like Matthew and Luke do, but Jesus faces three temptations:

* the temptation to satisfy his physical hunger,
* the temptation to test God's faithfulness,
* and the temptation to seek power and authority apart from God's plan.

Yet, in each instance, Jesus responds with unwavering faithfulness to God's will, relying on the power of scripture and the strength of His relationship with the Father.

This is an important lesson for us. As we journey through the Lenten wilderness, we are invited to confront our own temptations and struggles. It is a time of introspection, repentance, and spiritual discipline, as we seek to align our lives more closely with the will of God. Just as Jesus relied on the Spirit's guidance and the truth of God's word to overcome temptation, so too can we find strength and sustenance in our union with Christ.

Having emerged victorious from the wilderness, Jesus begins His public ministry with a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In verses 14-15, Mark records Jesus’s words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

This proclamation serves as encouragement to all who would hear: the Kingdom of God is at hand, and a new era of salvation has dawned. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus inaugurates God's reign of love, justice, and reconciliation, inviting all people to repentance and faith – and that is what the season of Lent is about.

As we journey through Lent, we are called to join Jesus in proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom. In a world marked by brokenness and despair, our message is one of hope and redemption. Through acts of mercy, justice, and compassion, we bear witness to the transformative power of God's love and invite others to experience the grace that has been bestowed upon us.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we reflect on the themes of baptism, wilderness, and the proclamation present in today’s Gospel Reading, let us consider how we can apply these truths to our lives during this Lenten season:

Embrace our Identity in Christ: Just as Jesus was affirmed as the beloved Son of God at His baptism, let us reaffirm our own identity as beloved children of God. May we find assurance and confidence in our baptismal union with Christ, knowing that we are deeply loved and cherished by our Heavenly Father.

Each weekend of Lent, our worship services begin with Confession and Forgiveness. This ritual is an affirmation of our baptism. We can come to the LORD confessing our sin because we have confidence in knowing He will forgive.

Confront Temptation with Faith: In the wilderness of Lent, let us courageously confront our own temptations and struggles, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain us. Now if your Lenten devotion was to give up chocolate, I know the temptation is real, but what I have in mind for us is more vigorous.

Eight Lenten Questions that Allow God to Use Us

* God, what is on your heart today and *how do you want me* to arise and participate in what you want to do?
* God, what stronghold do you want demolished in the place of prayer today?
* What need do you want to meet *through me* today?
* What hope do you want to extend *through me* today?
* What injustice do you want to cease *through* *me* today?
* What suffering do you want to end *through* *me* today?
* What pain do you want to comfort *through me* today?
* What words of life do you want spoken *through me* today?

On Ash Wednesday, I challenged us with eight questions we should ask the LORD during our Lenten devotional time, *and then* wait on the LORD for an answer. Through prayer, fasting, the study of scripture, and meditation we will draw nearer to God and resist the allure of sin, following Jesus’s example of faithful obedience.

Proclaim the Kingdom of God: As bearers of the good news, let us boldly proclaim the Kingdom of God in our words and deeds. Through acts of kindness, generosity, and reconciliation, may we shine the light of Christ into the darkness of the world, inviting others to repentance and faith. I personally think the best way to do this is by our own example.

As we journey through the Lenten wilderness, may we be strengthened and sustained by the truth of God's word and the power of Christ's resurrection. Let us embrace our baptism into Christ Jesus with joy and gratitude, knowing that we are called to walk in His footsteps and proclaim the good news of salvation to all who would hear.

May this Lenten season be a time of spiritual renewal and transformation, as we draw nearer to God and experience the fullness of His love, grace, and mercy. And may we emerge from this season of preparation as faithful disciples, ready to continue the work of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and bearing witness to the love of Christ in our world.

**Prayer**

Merciful God, accompany our journey rough these forty days. Renew us in the gifts of baptism, that we may:

* provide for those who are poor,
* pray for those in need,
* fast from self-indulgence,

and above all, that we may find our treasure in the life of your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen