

Mark 1 9-15

When I preached a few weeks ago during Epiphany, we looked at John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, we also looked at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as he prepared to call his first disciples.

The first Sunday in Lent always brings us to the story of the baptism again and Christ's temptation in the wilderness, which I didn't touch on last time, so I get a second shot at this passage.

To give you an idea of this wilderness we can see pictures from the area between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Not far beyond the city of Jerusalem, the wilderness stretches out to the east. You can see it in the distance from the top of Herodian, the fortress Herod the Great built for himself just outside Jerusalem.

Jesus would have seen freshwater springs, palm trees, and cultivated fields, only minutes away from the barren wasteland where he was being tested.

Fresh fruit and cool water were within his view throughout that forty days, yet these were not what Satan used to tempt Jesus.

Let's look at how Mark builds his narrative.

He covers a great deal in these few verses. They pull together Jesus' baptism, his temptation, his announcement of the coming of the kingdom, and his call to repentance and belief.

Mark uses strong language.

The heavens were "parting" (Greek: *schizo*—ripped open) (v. 10).

The Spirit "drove out" Jesus into the wilderness "immediately" following the baptism (v. 12). Jesus was tempted by Satan.

He dwelled with wild animals and was attended to by angels (v. 13). He preaches, "Repent, and believe in the Good News" (v. 15).

In the Exodus, the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea into the dry air of the desert wilderness. There they encountered many temptations during their forty-year wilderness journey.

Now Jesus passes through the baptismal waters of the Jordan and goes immediately from the cool water to the hot wilderness. We can almost feel the quick chill as the desert air quickly evaporates the water from his body.

There is an important difference between the experience of the ancient Israelites and Jesus' experience, however. The Israelites often failed their tests—Jesus does not fail his.

Each of the four Gospels includes an account of Jesus' baptism. Mark's account is the earliest.

He lays out his account in three distinct scenes, and each scene gets only two verses.

The first scene is Christ's baptism, then the spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, complete with wild beasts and angels, and the final scene brings Jesus into the world proclaiming the kingdom of God.

There is still evil in the world. We are still broken people, let's take a look back at the Old Testament, right at the beginning the story of God's covenant with Noah, and compare it to this passage from Mark's gospel.

Jesus may be heading into a wilderness filled with wild beasts, but Noah has just spent more than a year cooped up with his own floating zoo.

Mark doesn't explain why the wild beasts are important to his story, and he is the only gospel writer who mentions them. His Gospel was probably written when Nero was having Christians torn to pieces by wild animals.

We are left to decide if the wild beasts pose a threat, or if they are symbolic of the coming Kingdom, where all is at peace and wild animals no longer present any danger. Certainly, in Noah's story, the animals represent God's desire to start over, to give creation a second chance.

There are more parallels. Just as Jesus comes up out of the Jordan River's baptismal waters, Noah comes out of the flood. Both Jesus and Noah immediately hear the voice of God make an announcement. For Jesus, it is the assurance that he is God's beloved Son, and God is pleased with him.

But the words God speaks to Noah form the very first covenant we find in the Bible. That word 'covenant' is so important, God mentions it eight times in nine verses.

The word "covenant" is of Latin origin (con venire), meaning a coming together. It is where two or more parties come together to make a contract, agreeing on promises.

Unlike the covenants that will follow in the Bible, *this* first agreement is completely one-sided.

God simply says, “I promise I won’t ever again destroy the earth by flood.” And to seal the agreement, God posts a very visible “note to self” as a reminder. He hangs his rainbow in the sky.

As Noah climbed out of the ark, he walked into a world that no one had ever seen before, a world that was being re-created right before his eyes. But he didn’t go alone. The rainbow is a reminder that God would always be with him.

As Jesus walked out of the wilderness and headed up the road toward Galilee, he was also walking into a world being re-created before his very eyes, but the change was not yet visible to anyone else.

When the voice from heaven had spoken at his baptism, Mark tells us the heavens were ripped open. It’s the same word he uses later to describe the rending of the curtain in the temple at the time of Christ’s crucifixion (16:38). God was breaking into the world to establish his kingdom once and for all.

Both Jesus and Noah experienced God’s presence, God’s provision, and God’s promise as they made their way through the wilderness.

God’s final covenant is the promise, sealed with Jesus’ own blood, that he will restore all of creation to its intended perfection and right relationship to God.

And this is where we come into the picture.

Just as Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism, so we receive the Holy Spirit when we claim Jesus as Lord.

Scripture says that the Spirit descended like a dove on him, but that little preposition in Greek really means “into.” The Spirit descended *into* Jesus, filling and strengthening him, even as it anointed him.

We also can be filled with the Holy Spirit. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can accomplish anything for the kingdom of God.

It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can withstand the tests and temptations that bombard us every day. God is present with us in his Spirit. By the Spirit, God stays with us.

We must be on our guard though. That same Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, to be tested, to live among wild beasts, and to depend on God’s angels to care for him. Be aware

that when we ask God to fill us with his Holy Spirit, we are asking God to send us into the wilderness.

When we seek God's Spirit to live in us, we must be prepared to set out on a spiritual journey that will transform us. What we learn in the wilderness, and our faithfulness to the call we are given, will determine how successfully we complete that calling.

It does no good to stay out in the wilderness, though. There is nothing to be gained by continuing to wander through the barren mountains, once we've learned what our mission is.

God didn't leave Jesus in the desert, any more than he left Noah in the ark. Just as the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, the Spirit also led him into his ministry in Galilee.

That same Spirit pushes us into the wilderness where we can learn to depend on God's provision and we can learn to face our trials by depending on God's strength, not our own.

The season of Lent is a perfect opportunity to do just that. These forty days give us time to seek God, to develop our trust in him, to walk in his way.

Then we can be ready when the Holy Spirit calls us out of the wilderness and into our purpose as Christians and as a church.