

Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

Trust Who You Are in Christ

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus enters the scene as he comes to the Jordan river to be baptized by John the Baptist. The Baptism by water is the beginning of the Son of God Jesus's participation in the world of flesh. Just as Jesus was emerging out of the water of baptism, a voice from heaven came, saying, "You are my Son." Mark is letting us eavesdrop on what God said to Jesus. At this point, no disciples had yet been called and no crowd was rushing to see him perform healing miracles yet. Unlike the time the voice from the clouds said to the disciples "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him," these words are for Jesus, so Jesus could begin his ministry with a firm self-understanding as to who he was, God's beloved Son, with whom God is well pleased.

It is this self-knowledge that would sustain Jesus in the wilderness come what may. If that is the case for Jesus, so it is with us. Through the water of Baptism, God claims us, as God claimed Jesus in his baptism, so we know who we are, as we face the temptations in our lives and be tested and follow the way of Jesus, the straight path of justice, loving-kindness and forgiveness, the way of peace, amidst many a crooked path where Jesus did not tread.

As soon as Jesus received these words of affirmation from God, the Holy Spirit, the Divine Will in Motion, drove Jesus out into the wilderness. It's interesting how the gospel writer Mark chose to describe this. Mark did not write, "encouraged by the validation that he is loved by God as a Son, Jesus strode boldly into the wilderness." Rather, he describes that Jesus was driven by the Spirit into it.

Wilderness was not where Jesus would have chosen to go; rather, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was compelled to go to the desert and face Satan, who is the Lord of all that resists and oppose God. Satan is the power-that-be of the world that defies God. Have you ever had an experience where you were moved to action, or compelled by an energy that is more than just a rational decision or a logical choice of your own? When we stop insisting on our own way, washing away all the scheming and calculating ways that used to define the way we lived, and come clean before God, as we do fresh out of the cleansing water of baptism, vulnerable and yet trusting in the One who claims and loves us, the Spirit can use us and move us into the unknown territory. And we can follow, because if God sent angels to serve Jesus in the wilderness, protecting him from the wild beasts, God would surely provide the protection to

those who follow Jesus. That's why Jesus came after all, to show us that God is trustworthy and to show us the way we are to go, following him. And this is where we are, at the beginning of this season of Lent.

And the unfailing Love of God for Jesus the Son is only half of what God said. The divine voice continued: "with you I am well pleased." Again, it's curious that God declares such a full approval and even delight in Jesus, who, by the way, has not yet even started his ministry. God is well pleased with Jesus not because of what Jesus has done or how well Jesus has carried out God's will; that is yet to be seen. God declares God's unconditional love for Jesus because he is a Son after God's own heart, obedient and fully focused on doing God's will.

Yes, Jesus is unique; he's not just one of us, but one who became one of us to show God's love for us. He is the perfect embodiment of the Divine love and goodness, which is something we strive to be but are not. Yet, the truth that God loves us as God loves Jesus is evident in the voice from the cloud that said to Jesus' disciples Peter, James and John, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" When your parents tell you "Now you listen to me!" it means you'd better do what they say. To listen to is to obey. God was telling the inner circle of Jesus's disciples, and by extension to us the present-day followers of Jesus, to obey Jesus, who obeys God perfectly. God wants the same mind to be in us that was in Jesus, so that we, too, may be God's beloved children with whom God is well pleased, not because of what we've done or how well we carried out God's will, but because we offer ourselves to do God's will.

Through the water of Baptism, God claims us, as God claimed Jesus in his baptism, so we know who we are, IN Christ. As we follow Jesus into the wilderness, we need to remember, and trust, who we are in Christ. As the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, we, too, experience the wilderness of our lives and are sustained by this knowledge that the almighty God who rules the universe loves us and God's Spirit guides us.

Now Mark tells us Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days, but Mark doesn't care to describe what happened in that time, like Matthew and Luke do. One Bible scholar suggested that the reason is Mark doesn't care about the contents of the temptations in the wilderness, because the point he wants to make is that Jesus was retracing the history of Israel in order to rewrite her story. Whereas Israel in the wilderness complained and meandered through for forty years in sin, rebellion, and distrust, Jesus did not succumb to Satan's temptations the wilderness for forty days.

But there are even earlier memories in the biblical past. The 40 years Noah & the Company spent in the ark, floating on the flood water, when God decided to wash the entire creation clean. God saw the filth the humans had created upon the earth, and decided it had to be totally scrapped, save for a small remnant to start it all over.

Afterwards, God established a covenant between God and all creatures for all times that God would never again destroy the earth and all that lived on it. Ancient Israelites thought of lightning as God's arrows fired from a mighty bow. When God said, "I have set my bow in the clouds," that "bow" was the bow to shoot the arrows from. By "setting" the bow in the clouds, God hung up God's weapon of mass destruction. Up in the sky among the clouds, the bow God hung turned into a rainbow, to remind God of God's own refusal ever again to take up the divine bow against humanity/world.

Instead, God decided to be patient, merciful, forgiving, even and especially, when the humankind with their corrupt and evil ways tempt God to wash them all away, again. God would deal with God's creatures differently, however corrupt they may be; rather than destroying the whole creation, God would redeem it and restore it, and now, God's weapon of choice to do that would be Love.

When we talk about covenant, it carries a sense of mutuality. The covenant of marriage is a covenant of mutual love and respect between two people. The Covenant of Mutual Ministry, which we have with our sister congregations, is an agreement among the churches to support one another in the shared ministry of Jesus Christ. But, in the case of the Covenant between God and God's Creation, it is God who establishes it, and it is God who decides who are included in it, and it is God who upholds it. We don't get to negotiate its terms! And that's a good news.

The passage that comes immediately before today's reading describes God's charge to the humankind in our relationship to and our responsibilities over the created world. But even when we fail to uphold our part, God keeps the covenant, safeguarding the creation. The rainbow which is the sign of this covenant and the reminder of it for God, gives us hope because, in this covenant, God promises to take responsibilities for our failings, rather than obliterating God's creation again. This covenant, which is a universal covenant, is as good as God is, the creator of the universe; its efficacy is not dependent on our ability to meet its terms.

As time passed, the world became corrupt again, displeasing God. But God gave up his bow, his weapon, and promised "no more flood to wash away the corruption." Instead, God is

committed to deal with the sinful world. So, God first provided the Law through Moses, so the people, by obeying it, could live in the right relationship with God and with one another, the way God intended them to.

When that didn't cut it, God started sending prophets, like Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Isaiah, all the way down to John the Baptist, to sound the alarm and wake up the troubled society from its self-destructive insanity, (you think it's bad now, it was bad, then, too.) And in the fullness of time, God sent God's beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased, with the message of repentance, that is, turning away from the paths that lead to death and to the path of life in the right relationship with God, and trust in the Good News that the kingdom of God is near with all its glory. God will prevail.

And to this day, God calls ordinary people to follow Jesus, to continue his ministry of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation, without giving up or losing hope, no matter how overwhelming the chaos of our wilderness. The Satan and all its minions may seem too great for us to counter. But remember, and trust who we are in Christ. In Christ, we are God's beloved children with whom God is well pleased. As we face off our Satan in our wilderness, God will send angels to serv us and the wild beasts will not harm us.

What is your wilderness this Lent? Where in your life is Satan the Lord, tempting you to judge and destroy, rather than to forgive and build-up. Where in our world is Satan the Lord, tempting us to resort to the weapon of violence, rather than to engage in the hard work of dialogue. Where in our hearts is Satan the Lord, tempting us to lose hope, despair, or give-up, because the chaos is just overwhelming? Wherever this wilderness is, Jesus has gone there, and we are to follow. We will come through it if we trust who we are in Christ.