

Mark 1:9-15

Lent 1B + February 21, 2021
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
The Beloved Son Driven Out

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on Him like a dove, and the Father calls Him His beloved Son. It's a beautiful moment.

The very next verse, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. If that sounds a little rough, it is. The word there is the same word for getting rid of demons: usually, you have Jesus driving out unholy spirits, but here you have the Holy Spirit driving out Jesus. It's not very nice at all.

Did ... something happen between those two verses? One minute, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are showing a lot of love, and the next minute the Spirit drives Jesus out into a desolate place. Was there some sort of inter-Trinitarian squabble? Has something changed?

Have no fear. Father, Son and Holy Spirit haven't changed a bit. What has changed is that Jesus' public ministry has officially begun, and remember what this is all about: He's taking the place of sinners. That's why He's just been baptized, right? That baptism by John in the Jordan River is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus doesn't need to repent and He doesn't have any sins to be forgiven for; but He gets in line and gets baptized anyway. The kickoff to His public ministry is Jesus saying, "I'm with these guys" by taking His place among sinners. Essentially, their sins are washed off of them and washed onto Him.

What happens to sinners? They get cast out. They end up in the wilderness, not the Promised Land.

Remember, for instance, the people of Israel in the book of Exodus. By any measure of the world, they're a nothing: they're a large collection of people with a common ancestor, but they're not a nation. They're slaves, destined to be forgotten, until the Lord calls them out of Egypt, leads them across the Red Sea and into the wilderness on the way to the Promise Land. It's a journey that should take about two weeks walking, but it takes forty years because they keep rebelling. Along the way, the Lord provides them with food, with health, with shoes and clothes that don't wear out. Whatever they need, He provides. But even though He's rescued them and leads them, they start to panic as soon as they get hungry or thirsty. They keep on moaning about how they miss cucumbers and leeks back in Egypt, even though those veggies came with the price tag of slavery, beatings and the systematic killing of their baby boys. They're sure that they're going to die before they get to the Promised Land. Even when they can see God in a cloud of glory on top of Mt. Sinai, they beg Aaron to make an idol for them to worship instead; and when he fashions a golden calf, even while they can still see God in that cloud of glory, they choose forms of worship that involve some crazy feasting followed by activities which are, um, not for family viewing.

God's chosen people do a horrible job at responding to His choosing. They're constantly trying hard, it seems, to get God to *un*choose them. Many die in the wilderness and never reach the Promised Land. By the time they finally cross the Jordan, it's a whole new generation of Israel. What a mess this has been.

Back to our gospel lesson, then. If the beloved Son of God is going to take the place of sinners, He might as well start by taking the place of these people. The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness because that's where God's people failed to honor God, and so Jesus goes to do what they failed to do.

They had food and grumbled anyway, so He fasts for forty days and nights without complaint, even while the devil is tempting and goading Him the whole time. He humbly submits to the hardships of hunger and wild beasts without fear or resentment, even though He's the all-powerful Son of God and could instantly make everything to His liking, ditch the suffering and set some cherubs to work peeling grapes and fanning His brow with palm fronds. He faithfully endures those forty days of fasting, patiently waiting for His crossing the Jordan back into Canaan, even though He's the King of kings and all real estate belongs to Him.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness are shorter than Israel's forty years, but they're infinitely worse. He's there on behalf of all of them. He's the singular target of Satan throughout. He suffers temptation far more because He never gives in; and the one who gives in stops feeling the temptation because he's doing the sin. He even suffers the effects of fasting for forty days in His body. Throughout, He doesn't sin, not once.

Now, if God were strictly a God of law, then the reason for all of this would be different. After forty days, Jesus would announce, "See? It can be done! I just did it. I took on human flesh and I didn't use My divine powers at all, and I just made things worse on Myself than you ever had it in the wilderness. If I can do that without sin, you have no excuse. So quit sinning. Now. Or else."

But God is not foremost a God of law and wrath. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Jesus does not go into the wilderness to be the example, but to be the substitute. As surely as a ram takes the place of Isaac, so God's Son takes the place of sinners so that they might live; and He does so perhaps more than you realize. He doesn't just take, but He gives: He doesn't just take away sins, but He gives credit for His righteousness. He swaps His obedience for sinners' disobedience, carries their sin to the cross and destroys it, while His righteousness endures forever. What it comes down to is this: let's say that some poor Israelite – we'll call him Frank – grumbles about the food, wants to go back to Egypt and parties hard with his neighbor's wife while he worships a golden calf. He's more than earned God's wrath. He deserves to be cast out of God's sight into hell forever. But then he repents and calls upon the Lord for mercy and forgiveness. Centuries later, the Son of God becomes flesh, takes on that man's sins in the Jordan River, goes into the wilderness and obeys perfectly, then goes to the cross and dies. On Judgment Day, it's Frank's turn to face the Judge who's got nail prints in His hands because of Frank's sins. The Judge looks at Frank and says, "Enter My kingdom. I don't see any sin, because I took that all away. Instead, I see perfect obedience, because I've given you the credit for Mine even as I've suffered your sentence. Eternal life is yours."

That's why Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. He's taking the place of sinners to save them. It's not just the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus, either. He's doing it for you; because you, my friends, are lousy at resisting temptation.

You know what tempts you. It might be the base stuff that upstanding Christians frown upon because your old sinful nature wants to stay friends with the world, or it may be the pride that frowns upon those who are tempted to the base stuff. It's probably a combination of both. Whatever the temptations you face, you're tempted to deal with them poorly. There are the temptations you don't even notice anymore because you've decided that those sins are just who you are, the price of admission for living through another day. Then there are those that torment you more; and so you make the perfectly reasonable decision in your mind that it's better just to give into them so that you can get on with life without the torment. There are those that you fight hard and resist more than you used to: good for you, except that then you start to think that you're righteous before God because you didn't sin as quickly as before.

Far more dangerous, though, is that you're constantly tempted by cheap grace, by the belief that forgiveness is no big thing that comes with no real cost. Just like someone plans to drink too much because he figures he can take a hangover remedy when he wakes up, you figure you can sin and then

take two doses of forgiveness the following morning to make it all go away. You're tempted to reduce the sacrifice of Jesus to an antidote so that you can sin and then balance out your heart; and since Jesus has died for more sins than you can ever commit, then you figure that He died so that you don't have to worry so much about sinning when you're tempted because, meh, He'll forgive you anyway.

Cheap grace reduces Jesus to a whipping boy. If you're not familiar with the term, a whipping boy sat next to a prince while the prince got an education. If the prince misbehaved, the teacher couldn't whip the king's son, so he'd whip the whipping boy instead. If the prince loved the whipping boy, he'd strive to do better; but if he was cruel, he wouldn't care if the whipping boy suffered for his defiance.

Does your treatment of temptation indicate that you love Jesus or that you're cruel? Take a favorite sin of yours, be it gossip, unfair judgments, pride, covetousness, lust, whatever. As a Christian, are you really going to say, "That sin doesn't matter, because Christ will take the whipping and the cross, so I can do it?" If you wonder whether or not this provokes God's wrath, the answer is yes: Holy God does not enjoy seeing you reduce His Son to a whipping boy for your sin. But something even more dangerous happens here: you can't love the Son and keep willfully sinning, because that would hurt too much, so instead you harden your heart to not really care about Jesus. The big problem, though, is not that He doesn't feel loved – He's used to that from sinners. The big problem for you is that if you harden your heart, you train yourself to refuse His gifts of grace, and then you're unforgiven. At the same time, it becomes easy to blame God and grumble that He's the one tripping you up and making you sin.

Ponder and repent, my friends. Why would you die in the wilderness?

Ponder and rejoice, too, because Jesus has gone into the wilderness for you. He remained steadfast under trial in our gospel reading, and steadfast under trial when Pilate stood as judge. Crucified for your sin and risen from the dead, He has received the crown of life; and by His grace, He shares it with you. Do not make friends of temptation or sin, but always give thanks that the Lord has made you His own. As long as you're in the wilderness, He clothes you in righteousness that will not wear out. He feeds You with Himself, with living bread from heaven, often. He speaks His Word of life. He forgives your sins, even the ones that you craftily planned; and rather than make you cruel, such grace is given to make you kind. In Christ, you are not driven out forever: the kingdom of heaven is yours.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.