

Lent 1B
Feb 21, 2021
Grace Lutheran Church
22
Lakeland, FL

Gen 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
I Peter 3:18-
Mark 1: 9-13

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading sounds so familiar doesn't it? Didn't we just have Baptism of Our Lord Sunday? And didn't we learn about Jesus' baptism when we celebrated the Epiphany? But for today, we're not going to focus so much on Jesus' Baptism as on what happened after his baptism.

But first let me point out a couple of things. The story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness for 40 days may be familiar to us. In fact, accounts of it are found in three of the four gospels. The other accounts are strikingly different from Mark's rendering in that they speak specifically about what the temptations were and how Jesus responded to them. There is none of that in Mark's account. Simply 40 days, tempted by Satan, wild animals and ministering angels. And, given the lack of details, we should not hear this as a case of "Jesus withstood temptation and so should we."

So, what then speaks to us today? Jesus' time in the wilderness follows his baptism. His baptism, complete with the heavens torn open and the Holy Spirit coming into him and the voice of God speaking to him, his baptism changed everything! It turned his world upside down. And the next thing that happened was that the Holy Spirit thrust him into the wilderness. Wilderness – a place that is often heard of in the Scriptures, yes? And, interestingly the number 40 is often associated with time spent there.

Wilderness is a common theme in Scripture. When God's people were freed from their enslavement in Egypt, they wandered through the **wilderness** before entering the land of promise. They doubted Moses; they doubted God; they murmured and complained, rebelled and forgot what great things God had done and had promised to continue to do.

When Elijah feared for his life, he fled to the **wilderness** to escape Queen Jezebel and her soldiers. He was ready to give up – not just give up the work to which he had been called, but even to give up his very life. Helplessness, bewilderment, dismay, fear.

When God's people were marched into exile in a foreign country where they didn't know the language, didn't understand the customs, couldn't eat the foods to which they were accustomed, felt that they were removed from God's realm, they were in a **wilderness**.

And for us today in the umpteenth month of Covid-tide, we too may feel like we are in a **wilderness** cut off from our families and friends, forced into new routines and habits, wondering when it may be that things will get “back to normal.” And when we are in the wilderness, we are in shock, numb, despair, fear, anger, emptiness and any other number of feelings, not all of which can even be named.

The text for us this morning is found in the Psalm appointed to be read today. But first, let me offer some context – while some of the Psalms were written by King David, not all of them were; they cannot each be linked to a specific time period in which they were written. Rather, they constitute the first hymnal of God’s people – they were used individually and in worship. In the Psalms we find every range of emotion – joy and praise and peace and calm and lament and outrage and desperation. The Psalms run the gamut.

So, the text for our consideration today: verse 6 – “Remember your mercy O Lord and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.” Remember God. In Hebrew, the word “remember” does not mean simply to have a cognitive recollection; remembering always carries action with it. Remember God – remember and do something about it – remember your mercy and love God, because we surely need it now!

This recalls Moses’ prayer for God’s mercy in the face of the people’s worship of the golden calf. And it recalls the prayer for mercy as God’s people who had been in exile in Babylon returned back to their home – a place that was in desolation. “Remember your mercy O Lord and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.” And so it was that the people of God were rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the Temple and in the course of this, the Torah was rediscovered and brought to Ezra who read it to the whole people of God gathered together. And in the weeping and joy of coming upon this holy statement of God’s covenant with God’s people they surely prayed “Remember your mercy O Lord and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.”

How old you may wonder. As old as the Flood. Not a sweet Noah’s Ark story, the images of which are the theme for a baby’s nursery. No. Noah and his family found themselves in a wilderness that grieved God’s heart and God said – No More. Noah, get you and yours and the animals into the ark. I will no longer abide this. And the Flood waters came. And when the storm had subsided and the times of wretchedness had been destroyed, God made covenant with Noah and with Noah’s family and descendants and with every living creature that came out of the ark. God covenanted that “never again would God destroy the earth through a flood.” And GOD made covenant, a promise of mercy and steadfast love.

And a covenant of mercy and steadfast love was promised to Abraham and Sarah, to God’s people in the giving of the Ten Commandments – I will be your God and you will be my people and this is how we will live together.

And to Jeremiah who wrote to the people of God in exile – separated from all that they knew and loved, wondering if there could ever be a time that they were together again, a time when God was in their midst as God had been for generations. To Jeremiah, God issued words of a new covenant that would be written in the **hearts** of God’s people – you shall be my people and I shall be your God. “Remember your mercy O Lord and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.”

And, so it is my friends that whatever wilderness in which you find yourself today – whether it is a personal matter – an illness, a broken relationship, a financial crisis, the darkness of depression or other mental disease – or a communal matter like the pandemic which we as a nation are currently facing. Pray the prayer of the Psalmist -- “Remember your mercy O Lord and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.”

But that’s not the only thing that I want you to know about the wilderness. In the sparse few words that we hear about Jesus’ time in the wilderness in today’s Gospel, we hear that while there, the angels ministered to him. When we recall the Israelites wandering through the wilderness to the land of promise, we remember that God was with them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When we remember the story of Elijah running from Queen Jezebel, we remember that God’s angels came bearing that which Elijah needed to continue on his journey.

My dear ones in Christ, know this – whatever our societal position or political persuasion or other understanding or belief, we are first and foremost the baptized children of God, redeemed and marked and loved and saved and sent. AND We are not alone. God is persistently present with us. The angels come and care for us in ways we cannot even perceive much less understand.

We have been marked with the cross of Christ forever in baptismal waters. We were named the Beloved of God. Words of prayer were offered that the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and joy in God’s presence may be ours. Amen

And so we with the people of God throughout the world and throughout the ages pray,
“Remember your mercy O Lord and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.”

Amen. May it be so.