

Lectionary B February 22, 2015 Lent 1
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
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Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

IT'S ALL GOD'S WORK

Doesn't it seem like we just had this Gospel Lesson? Well, we did sort of. At the beginning of Epiphany we did have the story of Jesus' Baptism, but it stopped before we got to the verses where "...*the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness.*"¹ Actually every year on the first Sunday of Lent our Gospel reading is about that time Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. And this year we hear what Mark has to say about it. Which by the way isn't a whole lot. We may remember the stories from Matthew and Luke about the three temptations Jesus was put through by Satan, but Mark doesn't tell us one detail about what happened out there in the wilderness.

What we do know from Mark is that after Jesus was baptized, God proclaimed Jesus as God's beloved Son, then the Holy Spirit literally drove Jesus go out into the wilderness for forty days where Satan tempted him. In some translations it says the Holy Spirit pushed Jesus into the wilderness. He was out there with wild animals. Mark doesn't tell us whether the wild animals were friendly to Jesus or not, but come on, it does say that they were wild. So what does that mean? I wouldn't feel too safe with a bunch of wild animals, would you? But then it adds that Jesus was waited on by angels. With angels on your side, what's a few wild beasts?

This is the story of Lent. It starts with our baptism. We are claimed by God as God's beloved children. During Lent, for forty days we are driven by the Spirit to a wilderness place, a time of introspection where God guides us in dealing with our own temptations while living among the wild beings of our world. But sometimes I think we get things turned the wrong way when we think about Lent.

Too often the emphasis of Lent is on what we do or don't do: What we give up, or sacrifice, or endure. How we pray or fast or give. In a podcast I listened to preparing for this sermon I actually heard two pastors using Lent more as a New Year's resolution. One said he was going to use Lent as a time to become healthier, giving up unhealthy eating habits and exercising more. The other said he was going to use it as a cleansing time, only drinking water during the day with no meals after 6 am or before 6 pm.² I guess this is all right, but it seems to be focusing on what they do, not on God's work.

The reading we missed last Wednesday for Ash Wednesday pointed this out for me. It was the parable from Luke 18 about two men who went up into the temple to pray, "...*one a Pharisee,*

¹ NRSV

²<http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/103-lent-1b>

the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.'

¹³ *"Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'"*

¹⁴ *Jesus commented, "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."*³

The point of this parable is that both these men are dead men standing, one dead in his own self-righteousness, and he doesn't know it, the other dead in his sin, and he knows it, and he pleads for mercy. What saves him is simply that he recognized that he couldn't save himself.

So in this time of Lent, let's read this Gospel story from Mark very carefully. Let's look at who is doing the work here. God is the one who claims us in baptism. That's all God's work. God is the one who brings us, pushing, pulling, driving, however, to this wilderness place of Lent where we are faced with our stuff. And a very important thing is God's angels are right here with us every minute of every day, serving us, caring for us. With God's angels with us, what are a few wild demons?

We are not justified by what we sacrifice, how holy we are, or how well we take care of ourselves. In fact our justification has nothing to do with what we do or don't do. We're right with God because God has made us right through Jesus Christ. That is what 1 Peter tells us. Here's how the Message Bible says it: *"That's what Christ did definitively: suffered because of others' sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones. He went through it all—was put to death and then made alive—to bring us to God."*⁴ It is all God's work.

Our Old Testament reading takes us to the days of Noah and the Ark. At first I wondered how this had to do with Lent and Jesus being tempted but I'm beginning to see. This Ark thing was all God's work: God's plan, God's command. Even down to the rainbow in the sky, it was all about God. Let's read what God said about that rainbow. *"When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I 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."*⁵

Hear that? God put the rainbow in the sky as a reminder to God, not for us to remember, but so God will remember God's own promise to all of us creatures of the earth. It's all God's work. So to me that gives the rainbow even more meaning. When I see that rainbow in the sky I know God is remembering and caring about us. That is better than me remembering any day.

³ NRSV

⁴ The Message Bible

⁵ NRSV

So according to 1 Peter, this story about Noah and the Ark brings us full circle back to our baptism. It says, *“You know, even though God waited patiently all the days that Noah built his ship, only a few were saved then, eight to be exact—saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus’ resurrection before God with a clear conscience.”*⁶ It’s all God’s work.

So is it safe to say Lent is sort of like a retreat on the ark? God puts us on this ark for forty days. Yes, it is no coincidence that Lent lasts forty days, and Jesus was tempted forty days and Noah and his crew of wild beasts were on that ark for forty days. So for this forty days of Lent instead of a time when we do things or give up things or sacrifice things to make ourselves right with God, let’s look at it more as a time when God gathers us up with our wild beasts for a time of renewal and cleansing. It will be different for each one of us because we each have different wild beasts in our lives.

The important thing is that it is all God’s work. And Christ is at the helm. What happens in the wilderness, or on the boat is a mystery. It is beyond our human realm of understanding, but not to worry because 1 Peter tells us, *“Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. He’s standing right alongside God, and what he says goes.”*⁷

So what is left for us is to follow Jesus. Listen to Jesus, read about Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit acknowledge that God is busy at work. God is right here with us. That is the Good News Jesus proclaimed as he came out of the wilderness and that is the Good News we are called to proclaim throughout our journeys on and off the ark. *“God’s Kingdom is here.”*⁸ That is what every rainbow in the sky tells us. God is here and God is busy working in our lives. God rides the boats with us and God leads us out of the wilderness.

Yes, Lent is a time of repentance. It’s a time to look at those beasts in our lives and to truly say we are sorry. But the important thing to remember is that our repentance is not what saves us. I want to leave you with a quote from famous Christian author, Oswald Chambers. He said, *“It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Christ Jesus.”*⁹

It is all God’s Work! And to that I say, “Amen!!!”

⁶ The Message Bible

⁷ The Message Bible

⁸ The Message Bible

⁹<http://www.beliefnet.com/Quotes/Christian/O/Oswald-Chambers/It-Is-Not-Repentance-That-Saves-Me-Repentance-Is.aspx>