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**Gospel: Mark 1:9-15**

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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There is a lot going on here in this short reading. Jesus is baptized. Jesus is driven into the wilderness and tempted for 40 days. Jesus comes to Galilee to proclaim the Good News. All this in seven verses. Each one of these could be expanded on greatly into its own chapter or even its own book. But maybe there is a reason, a point to not getting more of the details that we often desire when reading the Bible. Sure, there a lot of details we could ask: Who all were at the river? What exactly did Satan tempt him with? Details of John’s arrest?

I like knowing more details, more facts. But maybe, they can get in the way; distract us from the words that are important. I am reminded of what the Bethel Series teaches “Don’t let the vehicle distract you from the message.” The brevity of the stories forces us to focus on what is important.

Four days ago, Ash Wednesday, we began our Lenten journey. Today this journey continues with Jesus’ baptismal immersion, His wilderness temptation and His mission to proclaim the kingdom of God. On April 1 our journey will take us to His death and resurrection. We have the privilege of knowing how the story ends as we journey. This season of Lent, we will travel with Jesus through His earthly ministry and through His suffering, death, and resurrection for us.

Today our readings are filled with imagery of water, 40 days and promises. Our first reading is the conclusion of the flood story in Genesis. Because of human sin, God destroys the earth with a rain that lasts for 40 days causing a flood, saving only Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark. Yet divine destruction gives way to a divine promise. Like in creation, God blesses humanity and establishes a covenant with all creatures.

Noah had built an ark to house all the creatures of the earth. For centuries the ark has been used as a symbol of the church. The word nave compares our Sanctuary to a sailing ship. Look up and you can you see how our Sanctuary ceiling looks like an upside-down ship*.* Noah’s Ark was a symbol of hope during the chaos of the flood. In the midst of our chaos we gather together for worship and find hope. During Lent we have an “Ark of Hope” in the Emmaus Room. Each week on our calendar we are invited to bring an item “dish soap, deodorant, tooth paste” that we can fill our “ark” with for the Food Pantry and provide hope for the guests that visit.

Water is a vital part of creation. Water sustains and maintains life; but too little or too much water can end life. A glimpse at the headlines points out the destructive power of water’s presence or water’s absence. In the United States several parts of the country are afflicted with severe drought requiring water conservation measures. On the opposite end of the spectrum, floods ravaged the Plains states in the spring and summer, displacing from their homes many people who live near rivers. Last fall was a devastating hurricane season in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico. Our mission team just returned from work in Puerto Rico. My daughter and son-in-law endured as Hurricane Irma, as a category two, roared over their home in Florida.

Yet we need water as much, or more, than we need food, shelter, and other necessities of life. Since ancient times people have established their communities near sources of water. We cannot survive long without it. This tension between water’s ability to be destructive or saving is seen in our readings today. The waters of the flood overwhelmed the world in the days of Noah, even as God delivered Noah and his family from death. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus after he is immersed in water and baptized by John. Then the Spirit drives Jesus into the desert—a place defined by its lack of water.

Through water and the Word in baptism our former, sinful self is put to death, and we are reborn as children of God. There is a theme that flows through these paradoxes: in death and life, in flood and drought, God remains faithful. As the psalmists often reminds us, God’s mercy and steadfast love are everlasting. God saved Noah’s family in the flood with the same way God saves us through the waters of baptism. The baptismal covenant is made with each of us individually, but the new life we are given in baptism is for the sake of the whole world. God acts through the waters of baptism to save us from a sinful existence. This spiritual cleansing marks our new life in Christ.

Mark writes that Jesus was tested for **forty days and forty nights.** In the Bible, forty is always the time between; the necessary span before the gracious conclusion. It is forty days or forty years that numbers: Moses on Mount Sinai; Israel in the wilderness; the spies scouting out Canaan; the taunting by Goliath; Nineveh’s repentance; and Jesus’ appearance after Easter. For us, it is forty days until the resurrection.

Each year, Lent begins with an account from one of the synoptic gospels of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. Jesus was truly human, suffering from the devil’s temptations no less than we, and so he can stand by us when we are tested. Each day brings us so many ways that we are tempted. Think for a moment about all the ways, each day and each night, that you and I face temptation. Yet we, too, are accompanied with the Spirit of God. Verse 13 “*and the angels waited on him.”* As we read on our bulletin cover two Sundays ago, this was a similar phrase that was used to describe Simon’s mother-in-law after Jesus healed her. Simon’s mother-in-law ministered to Jesus. The angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness and we, too, are ministered to as we face daily temptation as God remains faithful to us. God’s love was with Jesus in the wilderness and God’s love is with us too.

When Jesus came up from the waters of baptism he heard God’s promise’ “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* In Genesis, after the flood, God makes another promise, “*When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth*.” We know the **rainbow** as a spectrum of light that is sunlight being refracted and reflected by droplets of moisture in the atmosphere. As we read the Hebrew Scriptures, we can use this natural phenomenon to remind us of divine mercy shining through all that rains down upon us.

God’s promises claim us as a child beloved and nurtured by God. We receive, along with Noah, his family, and all the animals of creation, a covenantal promise from God. God remembers us and promises us the forgiveness of sins and life in Christ. God gives and sustains faith by the Holy Spirit and adopts us as His children. We live our baptismal calling in community—not for our sake alone, but for the sake of the whole world. In today’s Gospel Jesus’ journey goes from baptism to wilderness to mission. Our own faith journeys may travel from temptation, renewed purpose and discovering oneself beloved by God.

Many of us were baptized as infants and therefore, have no memory of the specific day. But we have witnessed baptisms throughout our lives, often right here in this Sanctuary. During this season of Lent, I am going to try **every day** to remember my baptism. Through reading Scripture, attending worship and prayer. As baptized children of God we are united with Christ.

All what Jesus lived for us and won for us is given to us in our baptism. Romans chapter 6 tells us "*We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life”*

Jesus and Luther both relied on their baptism. At his baptism, Jesus hears the words, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* And the Spirit immediately drives him out into the wilderness. The Spirit that comes upon Jesus at his baptism sustains him when he is tested by Satan. His baptismal promise allows him to endure the wilderness so that he can proclaim the good news of God’s reign.

Martin Luther, renewer of the church died on February 18, 1546, 472 years ago today at the age of 62. He began as an Augustinian friar, but it is his work as a biblical scholar, translator of the Bible, reformer of the liturgy, and hymn writer that holds him in our remembrance. In Luther’s own judgment, the greatest of all his works was his catechism, written to instruct people in the basics of faith. And it was his baptism that sustained him in his trails as a reformer.

We never lose God’s baptismal promises to us and we may always return to them. Luther placed baptism at the center of the Christian life. In the Large Catechism Luther writes: “*Baptism is not a work that we do but … a treasure that God gives us. In baptism every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. … Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us and say: ‘But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body*.”

We don’t need to have water poured over us again. We have one baptism; its effect and significance continue and remain. The difference between baptismal water and regular water is the Word and promises of God. Therefore, baptism remains forever. Even when we fall from it and sin, we always have access to our baptism. Returning to your baptism daily is a matter of trusting God’s promises of forgiveness, life and salvation offered there. Through Holy Baptism we remember that God continually brings us to repentance and brings us to new life in Christ each day.

This Lent our weekly Bible study centers around Luther’s Small Catechism. There is a copy in the bag each family will receive today. In this small book, Luther covers the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession, The Sacrament of the Altar, morning, evening and meal Blessings. Luther asks throughout, “What is this? Or What does this mean?” These are the basics of our Lutheran Faith. My prayer for you this Lenten Season is that you find time to read, study and ponder this small book.

Earlier this year I took time and wrote the Small Catechism in my journal. This forced me to really reflect and be still with it. Now when I reread it in my own handwriting, this makes it very powerful and personal.

There are four weekly opportunities to attend study, with the first being this morning directly after worship in the Good Shepherd Chapel. Wednesday opportunities include soup/sandwich meals, speakers helping us to explore chaos and services will include Overheard: Conversations by the Cross. These potential dialogues are between two people who were by Jesus during Holy Week such as: the two thieves crucified with Jesus and Simon of Cyrene and the Centurion. Did they ever have a chance to talk with one another about events? If we could have listened to these potential conversations what might we have heard?

We give thanks for all that sustains us on our journeys of Lent and life: the communion meal, our community, and baptismal water remembering that through all raging storms and wilderness wandering, we are always beloved.

Later today I’d like you to take a moment, gaze into your reflection in a mirror and say to yourself the words printed on our bulletin cover from Martin Luther that remind us of God’s promises, “*I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life”*

Now many the peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.