

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

This Lent has begun with such a cruel twist. Lent began on St. Valentines Day, a day when we traditionally gift our loved one with chocolate or some sweet treat. But because of where Lent has fallen this year, maybe the chocolate is something we just happen to give up. Or perhaps this Lent you've decided to refrain from all "adult-beverages." Well, today...Sunday...is the day we get to enjoy that chocolate or that adult beverage, or any other self-indulgence we gave up since the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday of this past week.

We can enjoy it because today is a feast day, a festival day where we rejoice that we are set free from sin and death. Today is a day that is not numbered among the "40 days" of Lent. The Sundays of Lent are certainly part of the time of Lent, but they are not prescribed days of fast and abstinence. This means that today is our "Lenten-loophole" *if we so choose*. In other words, it's up to us to continue abstaining from that item, such as chocolate or any act of penitence of our choosing on Sundays during Lent.

But since creation, we all know how that goes...God tells us one thing and like the bad kids we are we do the very thing we were told NOT to do. St. Paul said it this way to the Romans:

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:15-20)

Yeah, no matter if it's us or the sin within us, we screwed it up back then and we continue to mess things up. And in that creation story, we also have the story of our fall from the very grace we were created into in the characters of Adam and Eve. They, like us, attempt to hide from God. They literally attempt to hide from God in their sin, their shame, and their brokenness, but we do so figuratively and somewhat literally hide from God in our self-righteousness. But the Good News in this fall from grace is that God came looking for them and God continues to come looking for each of us...to this very day!

And this old story of creation and our fall from grace comes to life again today within our Gospel lesson with the very same outcome...God's reign of grace in Jesus Christ finds us and sanctifies us as we gather in His presence and because he has gathered us today, through our faith we have the promise of grace in God's glorious Kingdom.

Today in the Gospel lesson we hear that immediately after Jesus is Baptized, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. In that wilderness, we also hear that Satan tests Jesus, he is also with the wild beasts; and the angels are waiting on him or serving him in the same manner we heard that Simon Peter's mother-in-law served Jesus and the disciples after Jesus healed her.

In the English translation, we generically say that Jesus is driven out into the wilderness. According to the Greek, Jesus is cast out to a deserted place, a barren forsaken place, an uninhabited region, or a lonely desolate place. But this place Jesus is *cast out* to seems to be

much more than just the wilderness. What do you suppose this wilderness is and what is the wilderness for you? What does your wilderness look like? What confronts you or tests you in your wilderness? Is Satan part of your wilderness?

When I think of this I suspect that our wilderness might be that feared place, that place where we are the most exposed and vulnerable...that place where we are confronted, that place of temptation...or that place where we are exposed to, and challenged with confusion, loneliness, and even confronted with the violence of wild beasts...those wild beasts can be symbolic of the threat of evil, harm, or the threat of difference or the wild beast of the unknown that we are confronted with each and every day...what is this wilderness for you?

I suspect it is not anything like what we imagine the Garden of Eden to look like or be like...but our wilderness is that place and those things that tend to tempt us and I suppose our wilderness can challenge our very faith when we too feel desolate, lonely, and vulnerable and we are left to imagine or wonder where is God...maybe our wilderness is where we attempt to hide from God in our sin and shame. But before we consider our wilderness, keep in mind that within our Gospel lesson today we hear of the Baptism of Jesus...first...and then the wilderness.

This Gospel lesson is actually a wonderful illustration of what Luther said about Baptism in the Large Catechism. Luther in that explanation reminds us that:

...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 (we can) 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.” This is the reason why these two things (*water and the Word*) are done in baptism; the body has water poured over it, because all it can receive is the water, and in addition the Word is spoken so that the soul may receive it. Because the water and the Word together constitute one baptism, both body and soul shall be saved and live forever: the soul through the Word in which it believes, the body because it is united with the soul and apprehends baptism in the only way it can. No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.¹

We are Baptized, and if we are Baptized we too are then sent out into the world, into the wilderness that is our everyday life along with the everyday challenges that confront us. Even as Baptized babies coming out of the waters of Baptism, they begin their journey through life as they begin to grow and learn, and their growing and learning is their wilderness.

And if we all have been Baptized, we have the promise that we shall be saved...saved from the wilderness that we all encounter in many and various ways after our Baptism. This is at the very core of what Mark is telling us today within this particular Gospel interpretation of the Baptism of Jesus and his forty days in the wilderness.

¹ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. “The Large Catechism, Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism” page 462, par 44-46.

Focusing then on JUST the Baptism and the wilderness it might help us to know that the Baptism of Jesus was seen early on as an embarrassment because it was and remains a sign of repentance. Here we are, five days into Lent...five days into our time of penitence and reflection and we have Jesus before us...showing us repentance by taking part in the most notable act of repenting. What does this mean then, because the sinlessness of Jesus seems to make this Baptism inappropriate, why would the very Son of God have remorse or regret, why would Jesus Christ need to repent? Is he not the holiness of the Holy One? He is and NO he does not need to repent. What this Baptism of Jesus suggests is that Jesus is associating himself with sinners who *do* need to repent...and Jesus becomes part of this in this very act of repentance himself. In this act, Jesus gathering us all together through repentance, through our need for grace and forgiveness, and gathering us with his gesture of repentance.

Gregory of Nazianzen was a Church Father who was ordained a priest practically by force, and only reluctantly accepted the responsibility and became a 4th-century archbishop of Constantinople. He is also recognized as a brilliant and profound theologian who has said this about the temporal nature of Jesus being Baptized versus the divine nature of Jesus who we figure is not in need of Baptism...at all:

As a man (Jesus) was Baptized, but he absolved sins as God. (Jesus) needed *no* purifying rites himself – his purpose was to hallow water.²

In the beginning we hear that the wind of God or the Spirit of God swept *over the face of the waters*, here in this Baptism we hear that God is creating again, God in Jesus Christ, renews us, creates us anew, by sanctifying water with his very Incarnate Word. And we hear how this then works for us through our Baptism when Luther reiterates this in his explanation of Baptism:

This is the reason why these two things are done in baptism; the body has water poured over it, because all it can receive is the water, and in addition the Word is spoken so that the soul may receive it. Because the water and the Word together constitute one baptism, both body and soul shall be saved and live forever.³

Jesus, in this Baptism, is NOT sanctifying himself, He is sanctifying water that sanctifies all of us.

Suppose for a moment that the ego of Jesus fills his heart and his head and he then decides...hey, I don't need to be Baptized...I'm the Son of God...as if his temporal nature could drive his divine nature and he declines Baptism. The water then has NO sanctifying purpose for any of us then. Furthermore, up to this point, the heavens had been shut up and inaccessible. So as Jesus is Baptized, we hear that the heavens were not just opened, they were torn apart. In this Baptism Jesus reconciles heaven and earth, the alienated are adopted, the invisible becomes *like a visible* dove and it is heard, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," (Mark 1:11b). In this Baptism heaven is now accessible to us...because NOWHERE in all of Holy Scripture does it say that the Heavens were closed off to us after this Baptism.

² Joel C. Elowsky, Editor, Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture, New Testament II, Mark*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2005. Section, Mark 1:9, Baptized by John in the Jordan, The Hallowing of Water, page 11.

³ *Ibid*, page 462

By our sin have been alienated from God, but now the door is open and we have been invited in when we were washed free of our sin, washed free of death, and adopted into God's presence in His glorious Kingdom by this simple act of Jesus' Baptism. Through the waters of our Baptism we are made anew, recreated and reconciled in Jesus Christ...and this is what goes with us as we head out to confront all that challenges us in our wilderness. In the wilderness, Jesus himself shows us his reliance on divine assistance in all that confronts him. May we too remember that we are adopted into that reliance as we are confronted in our wildernesses. St. John reminds us of God's words to us...

'See, I am making all things new.'
(Revelation 21:5)

And so I close, using some of Luther's words as he closes his explanation of Baptism in his Large Catechism...may the words of this Gospel and its proclamation remind us of the great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person that we become through those waters of Baptism as we head out into wilderness. May we regard our baptism as the daily garment that we wear out there in the wilderness. As Christ, the mercy seat, does not withdraw from us or forbid us to return to him even though we sin, so all his treasures and gifts remain with us in our journey. As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live.⁴

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

⁴ The closing of the sermon is from the closing of Luther's explanation of Baptism in the Large Catechism. Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. pp. 466-467