

Lent 1B (2/18/2018)

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

The Spirit that descends on Jesus at his baptism, claiming him as God's beloved child, is the same Spirit that immediately drives him out into the wilderness. Baptism and struggle are not mutually exclusive, but necessarily linked. God's gracious claim on our lives is not an invitation to complacency, but an impetus to confront all that prevents the world from thriving according to the will of God.

When I graduated from college, my aunt and uncle sent me a greeting card with congratulations and a command: "Good work, Nathan! Now, get out there and help us pay taxes." I'm sure they were mostly teasing, but their message pinpointed an underlying anxiety I felt at the time. I had poured myself into my studies throughout my young life and was eager to celebrate. But, looming just beyond the graduation ceremony was a future punctuated by a giant question mark. I knew I was supposed to "get out there and help pay taxes," but I had no idea where to start. So, my commencement was in question before it even had a chance to get going. **A brief moment of affirmation immediately gave way to a period of uncertainty and struggle.**

I recalled that feeling of abruptness this past week as I reflected on Jesus' baptism and its immediate aftermath in our Gospel from Mark today. As you may have noticed, Mark's narrative style is urgent, moving from scene to scene at a rapid pace. Don't blink, or you're likely to miss a critical moment.¹ The entirety of Jesus' journey from Nazareth to the Jordan to the wilderness and back to Galilee takes

¹ See Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 45.

place in only seven verses, yet these verses are brimming with significance, each one pointing to the next. We're familiar with the details of Jesus' baptism – his immersion in the Jordan by John, the rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit like a dove, and the divine pronouncement: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." But, we're less familiar with what happens next: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." **Jesus, still dripping from head to toe, is chased into the unknown by the same Spirit that has only just claimed him for God. A brief moment of affirmation immediately gives way to a period of uncertainty and struggle.**

Is it too much to ask that Jesus be allowed to bask for a minute in the glow of the Spirit's anointing? Is it unreasonable to let Jesus dwell in the knowledge of God's love? There isn't even time to take a selfie. Why must the Spirit ruin this uplifting moment at the river by suddenly pushing Jesus out onto harsh terrain where none other than the enemy of God awaits him?

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark provides no details of the content of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. Neither does he report Jesus' definitive victory over Satan.² All we know is that the first incident following his baptism involves a forty-day struggle with evil, a struggle that will apparently continue throughout the Gospel story.

The implication is painfully clear. **Baptism and struggle are not mutually exclusive, but necessarily linked. God claims Jesus as beloved child, but that**

² William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 60.

claim is not a promise of permanent security and comfort. On the contrary, the gift of God's singular love is the motivation for Jesus' courageous encounter with the very power that opposes God.

Of course, this same pattern applies to all the baptized. "Nathan, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever," we proclaim to the newly baptized. "Join us," we immediately challenge him, "in... bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."³ We know full well that God's creative and redeeming word will meet with a great deal of resistance in a world committed so many other priorities: wealth and status, self-sufficiency and security, violence and retribution. Nevertheless, **we connect baptismal identity with baptismal vocation, and so we anticipate the inevitable struggle.** David Lose puts it this way:

Christian faith is not a panacea, it's not an answer to all of our questions and problems, and it's certainly not an invitation to the easy life. Baptism into the Spirit of Christ is to be called to, indeed driven into, an adventure that will include testing, challenge, and temptation.⁴

The story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness is always appointed for the first Sunday in Lent, thus serving as a narrative basis for our own forty-day discipline of self-examination, restraint, and reliance on God's mercy. Lent, however, does not insist on our spiritual heroism, as if we could somehow match Jesus' faithfulness in the face of evil. Rather, **Lent is an occasion to resist all the messages that distract from God's creative and redeeming word in our lives: *Prove your own***

³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 231.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/>.

worth. Take care of yourself, because no one else is going to take care of you.

*And, when things don't go the way you want, lash out. In other words, Lent is a season to return to the promise of our baptism, and make room for God's transformative love to take hold of us again.*⁵

Dear church, the life of faith is not for the timid. Gathered by the Spirit of God around a word of love and a meal of mercy, we are immediately sent back out – driven out – by that same Spirit into the wilderness of our anxieties, our strained communities, our fractured society. **God's gracious claim on our lives is not an invitation to complacency, but an impetus to confront all that prevents the world from thriving according to the will of God. We're bound to come face to face with evil, but when we do, it will be with a watery cross on our foreheads, the mark of the one who endures the worst that evil has to offer in order that he might overcome it in the end.**

⁵ See Lose.