

Sermon – Mark 1:9-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Grace Lutheran Church

1 Lent – Year B

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“At Work in the Wild”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The joy of being chosen didn't last long, and for a moment I wished I had been overlooked. I wasn't sure, when push came to shove, that I wanted to be sent into the wilderness. I was fourteen years old and had been chosen by my fellow Boy Scouts for election to the Order of the Arrow, Scouting's National Honor Society. The award for those elected is the Ordeal, named for what it is. I learned that I had been elected to a time of silence and service, at the center of which was a night spent alone in the woods. Today, at this stage in my life, a night along in the woods sounds pretty relaxing, but I confess that teenage Dave was more fearful than he let on at the time. I liked being chosen, but I didn't necessarily like what it meant. I didn't want to go into the wilderness alone. The wilderness, after all, is always a place unknown. Minutes last for hours; every sound is louder in the ears than in reality; danger lurks everywhere. Of course, I'm sure there was an adult leader somewhere within fifty yards of me, and clearly I lived to tell the tale. But I haven't forgotten how I felt at the beginning of the Ordeal. I didn't want to go into the wild; I almost wish I hadn't been chosen.
2. The joy of being chosen didn't last long, and I wonder what Jesus was thinking in these still-dripping moments as he emerged from the Jordan. No sooner had he heard his Father's voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved;" no sooner had the barrier between heaven and earth ripped open; no sooner had the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the peaceful form of a dove – no

sooner had all this happened than the same Spirit casts Jesus out into the wilderness. I doubt Jesus was expecting a baptismal party with cake, but this? The chosen Son is sent into the wild with its ravaging beasts and Satan, too. This is no camping trip, pleasant or otherwise. This is round one in the championship fight between Jesus and both the forces of evil that are arrayed against God and the sin of humanity that has estranged us from God and creation. Into this, all of this, Jesus is sent forth from his baptism.

3. There is some comfort for us in the fact that Jesus is not led or guided but cast out into the wilderness. As the preacher Phyllis Kersten, with whom you *may* be familiar, writes in *The Christian Century*, “We don’t generally enter the wilderness on our own volition either. We are thrown into the wilderness.” Yes. We may seek out ordeals from time to time, but make no mistake. The ordeals and trials will find us. We know this to be true this year, as COVID has come upon us, forcing us into a wilderness of isolation, illness, and grief. But it’s always been true, whether due to a job loss or a diagnosis or any other cause. The ordeals come as natural disasters that afflict and as unnatural systems that oppress. We do not seek these wild places, but we end up there anyway. We will be tested. The testing is not the temptation we might imagine at the outset of Lent, chocolate or wine or time spent on social media or whatever. Neither is it the tawdry or lascivious sin we might imagine. Oh, this may all be worthy of our Lenten attention, from the chocolate to the cheap, but these are nothing more than symptoms. This is why, I think, Mark leaves out all the details of the trial. The only question on the exam before Jesus is whether he will trust his chosenness in the worst of times as in the best. “You are my Son, the Beloved.” Will you believe it? Will you trust this promise? When the sun has set, as the animals circle and Satan prowls – will you, Jesus, when the chips are down trust that you are who God says you are?

4. This is the trial at which we've all been failing since the fall, since Adam and Eve sought to be like God instead of simply trusting God. But where they failed in the midst of easy paradise, Jesus triumphs in the wilderness. Doing what we cannot, Jesus goes head-to-head with Satan and wins. He emerges at the end of forty days proclaiming the nearness of the peaceable Kingdom of God. Satan's time is up. The devil's grip on this world, on us, will finally be crushed in the victory of Holy Saturday when the crucified Christ plunders the storehouse of hell itself, but the game is already over. All sin is First Commandment sin, after all. In forgetting who we are and pretending to be God, all is lost. The rest is just detail, commentary. But in remembering who he is – the Son of God, the Beloved – Jesus restores our right relationship with the Lord. We are not gods, but neither need we be. We need only trust in the God who is; the God who is Jesus at work in the wilderness.

5. For this purpose, we are put to death in the waters of baptism. The old Adam and Eve are always seeking to make something of themselves instead of letting themselves be who God made them to be. As Peter reminds us today, we have gone under the waters of the flood, into a drowning that leads not only to death but to resurrection. It is for this that we are chosen. Who among us would seek the ordeal of the flood, the watery desert of unending ocean? Noah certainly didn't. But God chose Noah, and at this Noah surely wondered. No doubt Noah's neighbors wondered at him as he prepared the ark. While God did not spare Noah from the ordeal of the flood, God did save him and his family, their giant ark bobbing like a little cork upon the chaos until the Spirit's dove proclaimed good news by not coming back. Noah's faith was in the promise, even before the rainbow. That's how faith works after all. Faith trusts before the rain falls, not only after it has stopped. Faith comforts in the midst of wilderness, not only when we've come back home. Faith trusts the promise that in Christ, into whose death we are baptized, we are beloved children of God even when the world is falling apart. And that we are called to God's Kingdom work of putting it back together.

6. As the baptized people of God, we are cast out into the wild places of this world. To be saved from sin and evil is to be enlisted in the struggle against them. We don't seek out the wilderness, but it has a way of finding us. While the image most of us have of the wilderness is of sandy solitude, sometimes it comes in snowy togetherness. The same wild weather that dumped snow on us this week (and what's another foot or two of snow among friends in Chicagoland) brought snow and cold to surprising places. I'm sure you've watched the news out of Texas this week. There have been plenty of stories of mismanagement and selfishness; there always are. But the beginning of Lent is no time to stand smugly by, commenting on the sins of others. No. We are in sin; we need salvation in the wilderness. So, I give you the story of Chelsea Timmons, which perhaps you've heard. Ms. Timmons was making grocery deliveries in Austin, hoping to finish one last order before making the drive back home to Houston. On her last delivery, she found herself behind the wheel of her out-of-control car, sliding down her clients' driveway. While her car didn't collide with the house as she feared, it did become good and stuck. She was trapped in the wilderness, right there in the middle of civilization. But she wasn't alone. The homeowners to whom she was bringing groceries came out, tried to dig out her car. When that failed, they welcomed her into their home as she waited for a tow truck. When the tow truck didn't come, they let her stay. The homeowners, Doug Condon and Nina Richardson, added Chelsea to their family for five days until it was safe for her to drive home. The wilderness can be a frightening place, but it is less so when you are not alone. Sometimes we are the ones who are lost; sometimes we have the opportunity to provide angelic hospitality to others. Either way, we are not alone. Either way, Christ is at work in us.
7. Today is the First Sunday in Lent. Just a few days ago, we were marked with ashes, a reminder of the barren landscape of sin, death, and evil in which we find ourselves. While we once would have avoided such places, now we

gladly enter in. We bear on our brows the cross of the Christ who has won for us the victory. You are chosen, friends. If you were here today, I'd invite you to look up. The architecture makes a clear statement. This space is an ark, an upside-down ship, carrying us together through wilderness waters. You, church, are called and chosen. You, church, are saved. And you, church, are sent. You were never called, chosen, or saved only for yourself. Like Noah before you, you were saved so that new life could grow and thrive. Still dripping in baptism, you are sent by the Spirit into the wilderness. It might not be where you want to go, but it is where you are needed. Go, child of God. Go into the wilderness. You will not be alone. There is nowhere you go that Christ is not. There is nowhere you go where you cannot make Christ manifest. You are Gods' child, God's Beloved. Now go; there is work to do in the wild. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.