

Apart from Your Grace

Lent 1 2021

Rev. Doug Floyd

*Genesis 9:8–17, Psalm 25, 2 Peter 1:18–22, Mark 1:9-13*

Historically, Easter was a day for baptism: the weeks and months prior to baptism were used for catechizing the new Christians. The catechism and the baptism were seen as entrance into the body of Christ, but also as exorcism of the evil one. Corrupt patterns of thought and behavior were confronted through teaching, fasting, and prayer. After baptism, the new believer would receive a white robe as a sign of this cleansing and new life.

As we begin tis journey on this first day of Lent, we hear the story of Jesus entering the wilderness and facing trials of the evil one. Jesus has come to vanquish the Satan and his enslaving power of sin and death. As we hear the story, may we also hear Christ calling us to turn to Him and trust His Spirit to convict us of sin and lead us more fully into His righteousness.

Unlike the temptation stories in Matthew and Luke, Mark offers a stripped down, simplified story. He does not present a story of three temptations with a specific rebuke to Satan at the conclusion. At first, Mark’s story may seem like a short summary that leaves out many key details.

Listen again to the wilderness part of our Gospel reading: “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. (Mark 1:12–13).

Jesus is baptized. A voice from heaven declares, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (Mk 1:11). Immediately after the blessing of the Father in Heaven, the Sprit drove the Son into the wilderness. This word “drove” has an aggressive sound. The Greek word, ἐκβάλλω (Ek-va-low) is often used in an aggressive way. While it can mean “sent” or “put” or “throw,” it is most commonly used in the Gospel to mean, “cast” or “cast out” as in to cast out devils or to cast out money changers.

This aggressive stance could indicate the coming conflict in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of desolation it is in contrast to a place of cultivation. The Creator sets Adam in to garden to cultivate it. After Noah steps off the ark, he plants a vineyard. He immediately begins to cultivate the land. When the land it abandoned and lies desolate, it becomes a wilderness, it becomes the haunt of wild beasts.

In the Old Testament, wild beasts appear as a sign of judgment. If the people walk contrary to the commands of God, they and the land will suffer. In Leviticus 26:22, we read “And I will let loose the wild beasts against you, which shall bereave you of your children and destroy your livestock and make you few in number, so that your roads shall be deserted.”

Wild beasts appear when the people are judged and sent into exile. Wild beasts devour the sheep without a shepherd. As Ezekiel writes of the Israelites who are left without godly rulers, “So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; <sup>6</sup> they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.” (Ezekiel 34:5–6).

Jesus has come as the Great Shepherd to seek and to save, His sheep, His people who are scattered and being devoured. The rescue and redeeming mission of Jesus begins in the wild places where the wild beasts roam and devour human flesh. The Satan is also here, opposing God’s redeeming work in Jesus. He is seeking to thwart the work of Jesus. The angels have come to encourage and strengthen Jesus. Though He is fully God, He is also fully man. His humanity like our humanity will grow weak and weary in the wilderness. Just as angels strengthened Elijah in the wilderness, they strengthen Jesus. Though we don’t usually perceive them, they also play a role in strengthening us.

If we put this whole picture together, we see that right outside of Jerusalem, just beyond the Jordan, wild beasts prowl. The wilderness reflects the state of Jerusalem and all Judaea. The world is a wasteland and the Satan is in the midst of this desolation. St. Athanasius describes sin as the undoing of the world. The world falls into corruption and howling wilderness. Humans descend into devouring animals. This is the picture Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe of Jerusalem, leading to destruction and exile.

It is the image Nathaniel Hawthorne shows us in “Young Goodman Brown.” Mr. Brown walks into a forest at night and faces his townspeople in a terrifying demonic mass. The thin veneer of our culture is peeled away to reveal the ravages of sin and death.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus will return to the towns and the people after 40 days, but make no mistake, He will still be facing the Satan and the wild beasts. Throughout His ministry he will cast out demons in throughout Judea and even in the synagogue. The promised land is corrupted and filled with corrupted people. In our Gospel next week, Jesus will rebuke the Satan speaking through Peter. In the following week, Jesus will cast out the money-changers who have turned the Temple, the house of prayer for all nations into a house of trade, a commercial venture.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, the people will seek to bring about the kingdom of God through their own power and wisdom, but Jesus will slip away from them. On the fifth week of Lent, Jesus will announce, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.” (John 12:31). Finally, on Holy Week through Easter, Jesus will face and overcome the Satan in the work of the cross.

In Lent, we are walking toward the cross and the victory over sin and death. We are also coming face to face with the wilderness, the wild beasts, the Satan in our own lives and in our culture. Like the ancient Christian were are traveling back to our baptism, to the renunciation of evil, to our resurrection in Christ.

Lately, I've been meditating upon one phrase of our weekly confession of sin, "apart from your grace, there is no health in us." We are capable of descending into devouring beasts. I am currently teaching some students about Western History and we are getting ready to cover the Thirty Years War. The stories of what Christians did to other Christians is horrific and unthinkable. "Apart from your grace, there is no health in us."

I am thinking of the poem from Gwenallt that I included in our service bulletin. Gwenallt was an atheist political activist who eventually converted and became a Welsh Calvinist Priest. His poetry was rough-edged yet rang with prophetic clarity. He writes,

When we strip off every kind of dress,  
The cloak of respectability and wise knowledge,  
The cloth of culture and the silks of learning;  
The soul's so bare, so uncleanly naked:  
The primitive mud is in our poor matter,  
The beast's slime in our marrow and our blood,  
The bow's arrow is between our finger and thumb  
And the savage dance is in our feet.  
As we wander through the original, free forest,  
We find between the branches a piece of Heaven,  
Where the saints sing anthems of grace and faith,  
The Magnificat of His salvation;  
We raise our nostrils up like wolves  
Baying for the Blood that redeemed us.

"Apart from your grace, there is no health in us."

Thought we recognize our own capacity for evil, we are not seeking to grovel in our utter sinfulness but to delight in God's unthinkable goodness. He sought us out while we were enemies of God. We were the scattered sheep, we also were the devouring beasts. "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col 1:13-14).

We rehearse the work of Christ even as we ask Him to renew and leading us into the way of His holiness. Even as we pour out our lives in worship, we pray for our community and culture, we give to those in need, we serve in the way of love.

We continue to pray as we always pray, "Apart from your grace, there is no health in us." Even as we rest in His assurance that, "The mercy of the Lord is everlasting."

O come, let us adore him.