

"The Road through the Wilderness"

Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday in Lent

Messiah, Boerne

February 18, 2024

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

Text: Mk 1:9-15

Dear Friends in Christ:

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, when you call your people to repent, you want their *whole life* to be lived in repentance over their sinful nature and sins. *Thank you* for forgiving us *all* of our sins in Holy Baptism. Nourish us by your Word and Sacraments, and help us to use your Word in our daily lives, so that our walk, being led by your Spirit, may be *full* of your power and blessings as we confront with your Word the temptations of the devil, the world, and the flesh that assault us. While the wilderness may seem dreary and devoid of life to the unenlightened eye, help us to see that a life of repentance is not dreary but rather *full of life* as we continue to hear your Word and receive your Sacraments *with joy*. Remind us constantly that our victory over *all* temptations is *in you alone*. Amen.

Today is the First Sunday in Lent, and we begin our Sundays in Lent by traveling *the road through the wilderness* with our Lord Jesus Christ. Twelve-and-a-half centuries

before the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, the Children of Israel made the same kind of journey. In fact, the similarities between the wilderness wanderings of the Children of Israel and the temptation of our Lord in the wilderness are striking, too striking to be merely coincidental. That's because Jesus is the *true Israel*, and by His sinless journey on the road through the wilderness, He fulfills God's righteous will for *all* His children, that is, for everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed Servant for the redemption of the world.

Before traveling on the road through the wilderness, our text says that

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." (vv 9-11)

John the Baptizer was God's chosen instrument for preparing the way of the Lord, and the Lord Jesus prepared Himself for traveling the road through the wilderness by being baptized by John with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus didn't need to repent. He was the holy One of God, *without sin*, but He came to John to be baptized in order to fulfill *all* the righteous requirements of God (Mt 4:15). By His baptism, Jesus, "the Lamb of God, who takes

away the sin of the world" (JN 1:29), identifies with *all* humanity, and makes His righteousness available to *all* who travel the road through the wilderness united by faith in Him.

By being connected to Christ in Holy Baptism, God prepares us to travel the road through the wilderness of temptation in this life. As the heavens were torn open for Jesus when He came up out of the water onto the bank of the Jordan River after His baptism, so *heaven* is opened to us when we are baptized into Christ Jesus (v 10). As the Spirit descended in the form of a dove and remained on Jesus (Jn 1:32,33), so the Holy Spirit enters and remains by grace with all who are united with Christ in Holy Baptism (Acts 2:38). And as the Father's voice from heaven declared Jesus His beloved Son, the One with whom He was well-pleased as the sin-bearer for all people, so God forgives and is well-pleased with all who believe in Him as their Savior (v 11). Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, God clothes us with the righteousness of Christ and prepares us for our journey on the road through the wilderness of this earthly life with Jesus.

Jesus came to the wilderness, being led by the Spirit, after His baptism in the waters of the Jordan River. Led by the prophet Moses, the Children of Israel likewise

passed through water on their journey to the Promised Land. The Red Sea had divided to let them pass through on dry land but drowned the enemy host pursuing them. That may serve as a picture of your own baptism—with the enemy, the devil, pursuing you to see you done to death (*eternal* death in hell, that is). Your way out is through water, *baptismal* water, which leads you out into the wilderness again, where the enemy still awaits, "like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The difference is that you're no longer under Satan's control but have been set free through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The Children of Israel complained constantly about the wilderness, for example, about what they had to eat there—and what they didn't. Does that remind you of Satan's temptation, "Command these stones to become bread"? They also complained about what they had to drink and where it came from. Does that remind you of ". . . lest you dash your foot against a *stone*"? Remember: The Israelites got water from the rock that gushed water in the desert and that followed them on their journey. And regarding what their future held, does "the promised land" of "milk and honey" remind you of the devil's proposition to Jesus: "I will give you the splendor of the whole world if you will fall down and worship me"?

You know, I suppose Jesus had a lot to complain about, too. He came to the wilderness, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the glory of His heavenly home. Jesus *knew* that what lay before him was hardship and rejection—eventually, even suffering and death. Jesus became acutely aware of this when He learned that John had been arrested, that is, imprisoned by Herod. When He heard about it, Jesus came to Galilee and began proclaiming the Gospel of God. “The time is fulfilled,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God is at hand: Repent and believe the Gospel” (v 15). By living in repentance and believing the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus, we can safely journey on the road through the wilderness.

As much as the Israelites complained about their experience in the wilderness, one would think they’d like to forget about it. But ever since that time, God’s people have looked back on the Exodus wilderness experience as the *central story* of the Old Testament. It was there, in the wilderness, that God molded the Israelites from a cowering collection of slaves into a mighty nation. It was there, at Mt. Sinai, rising above the wilderness floor, that God gave them the Ten Commandments and taught them the importance of living by them. It was there, during their forty-year trek through the wilderness, that they learned

to rely on the Lord their God and to worship him alone.

Baptism does not call us out of the wilderness of life to comfortable isolation in the church, as if the baptismal font somehow cloistered us. Rather, baptism calls us *out into the world* where there are needs and wants, challenges and opportunities. The *wilderness* into which the Holy Spirit leads us by this Lenten road *is* the world, with all its temptations that can lure us to turn from our Lord and seek our *own* will rather than *His*. Temptation has a way of doing that, you know, of focusing our attention on what we want, the same kinds of wealth, fame, and power that Jesus was offered by the tempter, who is a formidable foe.

Fortunately, we do not travel this Lenten road alone. Jesus Christ goes with us; Christ *leads* us in "the paths of righteousness," showing us every step of the way what the will of God is. "The will of God," the Bible tells us, is that we should be saved, and Jesus obeyed the will of God perfectly so that He might do just that—beginning already at His baptism in the Jordan, continuing into the wilderness where temptation waited, and fulfilled by the proclamation of the Gospel of God. By Jesus' perfect obedience, we shall be saved, indeed, we are saved, and we enter the wilderness as changed people, a new creation,

born from above in the waters of Holy Baptism, to live victoriously in this world of temptation.

Dear Friends in Christ, we are to be *in* the world (as Christ came to be in it) but not to be *of* the world (as Christ was not of it), for we are "of the world" no longer. We have passed through the waters of Holy Baptism and are reborn. We are God's beloved children now, even as we follow our Savior down *the road through the wilderness* to the promised land of heaven. Amen.