

Lent 1B. February 21, 2021. Mark 1:9-15.

If you've been with us some this year, then there's a good chance that you've already heard some of today's gospel reading in church recently. Mark's breathless narration of these first days of Jesus' ministry compresses so many important events so closely together that we end up with overlap from week to week. Today we have again Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, sandwiching the traditional Lenten story of his testing in the wilderness. I suspect that the framers of the lectionary are just trying to give us enough to read for it to be worth it, but the effect of cramming these stories together this way is striking.

This is the first mention of Jesus in this gospel. The very first thing that we hear about him is this baptism. He comes up out of the water and sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him. A voice speaks, declaring God's pleasure in Jesus. We're off to a great start. All Jesus has done is be baptized, and God already has responded with miraculous demonstrations of gladness. I want to note right away, friends, that you are always already God's beloved. Before you've done the great things God is inviting you to do, God already is delighting in you and loving you. And surely a story that starts like this is going to be an unbroken procession of happiness and ease, right?

Well . . . not quite. The Holy Spirit that has just descended on him immediately drives him into the wilderness to be tempted, without shelter or food and surrounded by wild beasts. I can't help but remember the reported prayer of St. Teresa of Avila: "God, if this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them." And we know that Jesus' life is full of wonder and joy and friends and love, but also pain and rejection and hard work and loneliness. His time in the wilderness ends when his cousin and colleague John the Baptist is arrested, sending Jesus into his public ministry, which will in turn bring him into conflict with the rulers and religious leaders. Being God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased, evidently does not guarantee one an easy life.

And that's where I want to stay this morning. Because God will tear the heavens apart to love us and delight in us. *And* we will go into danger, will be arrested and persecuted, experience pain and rejection and difficulty and loneliness. Both things are true and are true at the same time. It is helpful to remember this now, I think. Now we are surrounded by danger; many of us are lonely and feel like we're working hard to no avail; pain is everywhere. This is real, and we do no one any favors by pretending that it isn't the case.

When Jesus is in the wilderness, hungry and battling and surrounded by danger, angels are with him. The Greek says that they served him, that they deaconed him. But there isn't any mention of them protecting him. They do not make him safe. They do not make his life easy. They make him not alone.

This is the promise of God, my friends. Bad things happen. We find ourselves in danger. We find ourselves in fights that we are not sure we can win. And in the midst of this, we are not alone. Endangered, short of resources, and possibly a little bit lost, we are also the beloved children of God. The promise is not that bad things won't happen; it is that we are never alone. That God is with us, even or especially in the most difficult, painful times. Things are really very hard. And the kingdom of God has drawn near to us, God's messengers are with us, God is tearing open the heavens not to protect us or to make our lives easy, but just to love us.