

Mark 1:9-15
February 18, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

What we have before us from Mark's gospel on this first Sunday of Lent is no easy passage. Behind these words of Mark are rich and complex ties to passages from the Old Testament that a sermon could explore and unpack. Yet, I am not sure that is the sermon, at least for today, I need to preach and you need to hear.

One of the points of contention I have always had with this text and their similar counterparts in Matthew and Luke are those words found in verse 12, "and the Spirit immediately drove him [Jesus] out into the wilderness"; where, of course we know he was tempted by Satan for an extended duration of time. What in the world Spirit? In verses immediately preceding this we hear the Spirit descend or quite literally enter in and fill Jesus. This is indeed a good thing, right? Don't we all desire to be filled by the Spirit of God? And of course, we then hear a voice from heaven declare these words to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Yep, those are words of comfort! We love to hear those and we need to hear those time and time and time again. So far, so good.

Life filled with the Holy Spirit isn't all bad until verse 12 and then the going gets rather tough for Jesus and for our reading of this passage.

When I envision the Spirit's working in our lives, this is not the image I conjure up. I cling to one of a loving, compassionate, and trustworthy presence that guides my steps each and every day. One that comforts me in times of need. Not a Spirit that kicks me out of the refreshing cool waters of baptism and into the sweltering dry heat of an arid desert where wild beasts are located and Satan lurks nearby just hoping to turn us from God. This is the part that really tests my theology or understanding of God and who God is. I struggle to comprehend a God who forcibly puts us in harm's way. A Spirit that quite literally kicks our backside out the door and into the abyss of evil that lurks in the world we live in.

Yet, in many ways is not that exactly what happens each and every Sunday we gather as the people of God to give thanks, praise, and glory to our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father in heaven. Does not the Spirit once again gather us in, descend upon us, fill us, and remind us that we are children of God and then, at the end of the service, does not that same Spirit send us out into a world where Satan prowls? Is not part of our very same mission as the church to, in the midst of our own wilderness wanderings, proclaim that God's reign has come near?

When I connect the text in this manner to the here and now of our baptismal identity it becomes much easier to picture a Spirit that sends us into the wilderness. Yet, I don't see it as the Spirit sending us into the wilderness as some sort of litmus test to prove to God we have all the right stuff in order to retain our status as "beloved" children. I don't see it as God inflicting harm intentionally upon us in the form of some illness, injury, or loss that we have to overcome, learn from, and be all the better because of it.

No, rather I have come to view this passage from my human vantage point as part of Christ's church on earth as simply, metaphorically speaking, a reflection of the life and mission of the church of Christ. The Spirit does in fact gather us in and pour upon our parched bodies and souls the cooling and life-giving water of baptism that nourishes us with the grace of God that offers words of comfort, hope, strength, and forgiveness for when we often fail in what occurs next; which, is we are driven out by the Spirit. Into the wilderness. Into the world. Where Satan lurks. Luring us away from our calling and baptismal identity. Setting before us the false promises that life and happiness come from worldly possessions, institutions, and mechanisms of power, control, and ultimately the work of our own hands. The enemy would like us to believe following Jesus is nothing but a cakewalk. Sit in our comfortable pews and remain inside the walls of safety we

have erected. Keep those who may differ from us out. Abide by the status quo and give into thinking that says God helps those who help themselves.

What about those who can't help themselves? What about the 17 whose voices were silenced this past Wednesday in yet another senseless, heinous, act of evil in Florida? Aaron Feis, Joaquin Oliver, Chris Hixon, Meadow Pollack, Alyssa Alhadeff, Alaina Petty, Scott Beigel, Jamie Guttenberg, Martin Duque, Gina Montalto, Nicholas Dworet, Peter Wang, Luke Hoyer, Carmen Schentrup, Helena Ramsay, Alex Schachter, and Cara Loughran.

What about those who seek help for mental illness but find none? What happens to their voices and their cries? What about the countless women whose voices have been muted far too long by males in positions of power and authority? What about those who have no access to potable drinking water and are forced to drink from tainted water because no one hears their pleas for help, speaks for them, and come to their aid?

We are indeed in the wilderness. The voice of Satan always nearby. His sickening handiwork always at work ushering in death, division, warfare, hostility, hatred and luring us to remain silent. Giving way to complacency and comfortability. But God has a mission. Jesus has a mission. And that mission is also the church's mission. To proclaim the good news of God and say, "The

kingdom has come near.” Not some spatial realm we inhabit, but rather the reality God’s reign is near. God’s rule will have the final say. Life will win. Light will triumph.

God’s reign comes near when we speak up for the voices that are silenced. God’s reign comes when, in the words of our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, “we pray for the inconsolable loved ones and the shooter and his family, for those terrorized by what took place and those who are unmoved.” God’s reign reveals itself when, as she continues, “we acknowledge our own failings and ask God to guide us in finding new ways to turn the tide together on both the availability of assault weapons *and* the lack of mental health care.” She continues in saying and reminding us:

But we know that those things alone won’t solve this epidemic. All of us, including the church, must take a close look at ourselves. How are we cultivating a culture of violence, hatred, anger and fear, and how can we participate in building a counter-culture where people can experience God’s intended peace and life abundant for all?

We know this mission we are joined to is challenging, frightening, exhausting and intimidating work that often seems to fall on deaf ears and lends us to think we may be all alone, Bishop Eaton reminds us we are not as she states, “We take each step certain that God weeps with us, walks with us in our deepest sufferings,

and in the end makes the ultimate sacrifice for us – through the death on a cross.

This is our strength for the journey.”

She then concludes with a prayer offered by Bishop Pedro Suarez of the Florida-Bahamas Synod of the ELCA, and so do we:

Dear loving God,

There are so many things we don't understand about our world. We might not know how the families and friends of the victims of today's shootings are feeling. But we do care. May they feel your presence in spirit through those that are accompanying them right now.

Help us to be mindful of the pain around us and to do something about it. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.ⁱ

ⁱ ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton; www.elca.org/news-and-events/7910, Prayer from Bishop Pedro Suarez found within her statement.