Lent 1B. February 18, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Genesis 9:8-17 (Noah and the Ark), I Peter 3:18-22, Psalm 25:1-9, Mark 1:9-15.

The Gospel

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. [10]And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.[11]And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. [13]He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, [15]and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

The Sermon

She felt terrible. Too busy, too full of her importance, she overlooked the questions on the child's face, missed the hurt and the hope, spoke carelessly – and regretted it later.

He felt terrible too. He was in such a financial mess. The interest on the loans was horrible. Writing the check was so easy. His boss never noticed. The audit never noticed. But he regretted it.

The kids hung out on the bridge, talking about jumping. Some were really scared; others laughed. But one went back later and thought long and hard about the consequences. Would he regret it? Who would care?

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"Lead us not into temptation," we pray. Better translated: "Save us from the time of trial" or "keep us from the hard test." We know God doesn't tempt us to wrong, but the testing comes so quickly and easily: the careless words, the financial dishonesty, the idea of ending it all. So easily they come and so easily they can overpower our personal resources of kindness, honesty, self-respect, and love for others.

Maybe today, on the first Sunday of Lent, we might look at Jesus who has just been baptized and seen a sign of how God loves him. Mark tells us the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, the desert, to fast and pray.

Remember when Rev. Scott preached about the wilderness back in January? He reminded us that the ancient scapegoat of the early Israelites was driven into the wilderness to carry the people's guilt away. Mark reminds us that there are "wild beasts" there. And the wilderness was where John invited people to come to be baptized, to repent and to change their lives. It was a hard place.

Can you think of a time when you were driven into the wilderness? Perhaps by a factor outside yourself such as the loss of a child, a mate, a job, your health, your self-respect? What was that time like…moving from a comfortable psychological place to a place where the wild beasts of anger, depression and despair threaten.

In the great stories of the Hebrew scriptures, we read of Adam and Eve. Our ancient forebears lost their place in paradise – driven into the wilderness of hard labor, murder and tragedy -- because they wanted to know good and evil. They got to know it all right!

We read of Noah today. The man who, with family and animals, was saved from death by drowning. God made a COVENANT with Noah and his descendants: a promise sealed by the rainbow that God would not allow a flood to destroy all the earth. Adam had failed. And so also did Noah. He left the ark and planted vineyards and shamed his family by his drunkenness.

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In today's brief passage from the Gospel of Mark we travel with Jesus after his Baptism. We hear God affirm that Jesus is Beloved. We follow his wilderness journey and the care he received from angels. We grieve the tragedy of John's arrest – which will lead to John's death. Jesus begins his ministry and continues John's call to repentance. He preaches the Good News of forgiveness, healing and blessing. Mark packs an awful lot into just a few sentences. But it's a short summary of *our* journeys as well.

We begin with our Baptism and God's affirmation of love for us; we have no choice but to be driven into the wilderness of reality: the reality of temptation, of death, of loss. But here is the difference.

Jesus walked the walk with God that Adam came to fear, that Noah could not fulfill, that you and I cannot walk. **Jesus fulfilled the covenant that God made with humanity.**

We call Jesus the New Adam, the New Noah, the CHRIST who marches before us through life to death to life. He overcomes the times of testing, challenges the dark side of trials, overcomes evil with good. When we wash our faces in the morning, we do not use the water of chaos or flood, but the water of remembrance that we are God's children. **We are meant to remember our Baptism, connected with Jesus all our days, so that when God looks at us, God does not see our sins and brokenness, but the faithfulness of Jesus.** Thus, the great story of God's covenant continues.

When we look at ourselves, we may regret, but we do not despair. Forgiven, we forgive. Chastened, we look to God for strength to overcome the next time of trial, the next test of our memory of who we are and whose we are: children of the same heavenly father, sisters and brothers of the same Jesus.

Perhaps we seek to make amends. May God help us with that challenge, for with many of our shortcomings, there are amends to make. For those that have no channel for amends, we simply fall to our knees and pray for the offended, for those against whom we have sinned, and we beg to do better the next time. God's grace offers hope to the harried woman who ignores her child's needs, the dishonest man, the trembling kids on the bridge. God's grace offers courage for a "next time."

We will be called to testing and challenge and suffering and growth – this world needs our care and attention, action and commitment, and God calls us to be part of the struggle as agents of love and protection. But we are not alone!

In your experience in the wilderness, did you sense a loving companion? Tested as we are, Jesus understands what we face. Our good shepherd protects the sheep when the wild beasts threaten. Our holy brother walks with us spiritually each day.

Look around you. There is also someone who will be a companion in your journey, if you but ask. There is someone who will pray for your courage and insight, if you but ask.

In that wilderness, that desert, those "someones" are the angels who care for us and propel us forward into the world where we are called to forgive, to heal, to bless.

Nothing can ultimately defeat those who live in God's love.

Be comforted, my friends, with the promise that God is with you. Be comforted by God's words of forgiveness and by the promise of the Spirit who gives you the strength and the faith to continue God's work in this world.

May the wilderness, the desert, of this world bloom with charity, and the long world of winter surrender to a springtime of Easter joy. Amen.