

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a forty-day journey that mimics for us the Israelites forty-year journey in the wilderness. Remember that word wilderness because it will resurface in a few moments. Although we most often think of Lent as a time of sacrifice, it really is not about sacrifice except for God's gift of Jesus. For us, Lent is really a time of relationship and repentance, a time to focus on our connection to God, to others, and yes to ourselves.

A contextual consideration for us today with our gospel reading is to know that the first three verses we read today; verses 10, 11, and 12; were also the last three verses in our gospel text six Sundays ago for Baptism of our Lord Sunday. These three common verses are the bridge or transition between two similar but different stories.

Six Sundays ago, the initial focus of our gospel reading was John baptizing and preaching in the wilderness. The focus of our gospel reading today is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Do you see that there is a person and the wilderness in each of these stories? The wilderness remains constant and only the person is changed, first – there was John and then – there was Jesus.

I also bet if I asked what Satan did to tempt Jesus in the wilderness that most of you could tell me exactly what Satan did, however, that is **not** the Markan story, which, as always, is known for its brevity. Mark simply tells us four things in the combination of these two stories: first, the Spirit descended on Jesus; then God spoke relationally; and then the spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where Jesus was tempted, lived with wild beasts and was waited on by angels; and finally Jesus began proclaiming the good news.

What we are hearing new today for the first time from this year begins with verse 12. The fourth and fifth words are of great significance in how we, anybody interprets and understands this reading. The fourth word is **immediately** which all of us know by now is used most often and overwhelmingly in Mark. The fifth word is drove. The Greek word used here is ekballo which depending on the context, encompasses actions like casting out, banishing, and producing. It is most often accompanied with an idea of force. The quality of forcefulness, however, may be nothing more than an assumption. Life is full of assumptions. About the Bible, about God, about people and about ourselves. And our assumptions, a kind of context and a kind of perspective, can hinder our spiritual journey in all kinds of ways. We assume force in so many of Jesus' actions and words, yet force is not generally connected with Jesus. The same thing happens when so many Christians talk about being in a battle with Satan. Is this because Paul talks about putting on the armor of God. As I recall, Saul was pretty aggressive but not so much Paul. Besides, armor is primarily defensive not offensive. Oh, by the way, I believe faith is not about us fighting a battle but about believing that Jesus, God fought the battle for us and that the battle was over when Jesus said: "**It is finished.**"

Okay, that was kind of a rabbit trail so to get back on track, do you know what the antidote to assumption is? **Surprise**. Christ's incarnation was a surprise. It's a surprise that life can come through barren places, I mean look at all the green around dry old Kihei, who would have thought that all that brown foliage could become green. It's a surprise that meek nobodies partake in divine plans. It's a surprise that nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing can separate you from love, yet, our assumptions believe there **must be** something that can . . . But **surprise!** Nothing can.

I want to now reread a verse from our first reading followed by one from our Psalm. Genesis 9:15 reads: "**I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.**" This is a covenant, a promise of God not just to Noah but to every living creature, then and to come. Then Psalm 25:5 reads: "**Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.**" This, my friends, is about faith, about trusting God's word.

So, why did Jesus go into the wilderness? Was Jesus cajoled or coerced or forced to go into the desert? I don't think so. I think Jesus went into the wilderness because the wilderness is, was always important to the promises and the work of God. Jesus went into the wilderness not with the conviction of success but because Jesus knew God was **present**. Jesus knew that God has chosen to rip to shreds any assumption, any boundary, any denomination, any doctrine, any ecclesiology, any structure, any theology, any **tradition** that would separate Jesus, or us, from God. Jesus entered the wilderness only with the promise of God's presence. Do we do that in our daily lives? Can we just trust God? You know, just love God and love others and leave everything else up to God alone.

One last thought from our gospel reading. Verses 14 and 15 end our reading today with: "**Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'**" Over and over, Jesus proclaims the kingdom God has come close or has come near? What does that mean? I mean, Jesus never says the kingdom **will** come near. I am reminded of the time some months ago when I asked a question something like this: "Would we act and live differently if we really believed the kingdom of God is already here - now?"

Then I think the obvious follow up question has to be – why? If we believe in God? If we believe in God's promises? If we love God and trust God? Should we not live the same way regardless of whether the kingdom is here now or later? I think it is incumbent upon us to live according to Jesus' teaching at all times, to love God, to love others, to serve all.

Hear then the good news:

Do you sometimes assume God is not present?

Are you sometimes tempted to think that God is not present?

Do you sometimes think God has given up? Withdrawn?

The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at Baptism.

The same Spirit that drove or lead Jesus into the wilderness.

The same Spirit accompanied Jesus and cared for Jesus during that time and brought Jesus out of the wilderness.

The same Spirit is with us, you.

God is present.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said God is present this way: "**In total reality, he comes in the form of the beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbor, as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you, makes demands on you.**"

God **is** present, my friends, God **is** present.

Grace and peace to you my friends. This week may you thank God with joyful surprise at how much we, you have assumed incorrectly.

Amen