

February 21, 2021 – The First Sunday in Lent [Year B]

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalms 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

MARK 1:9-15

Epiphany Lutheran Church • Richmond, VA

Like many other people, my family decided to get a COVID puppy last year. That is, in those early days of the pandemic lockdown, when there was no school and no going out and we were all stuck at home we thought it would be the perfect opportunity to get our first family dog. We would be able to devote the necessary time things like housetraining and crate-training. Always around and playing nowhere else but in the backyard, we would give it plenty of love and socialization so that eventually, we thought to ourselves, we would have a nice well-adjusted animal companion.

Joy, as we named her, is a sweet, loving pet. She is soft and affectionate and playful. She is a wonder to watch run and catch a Frisbee in mid-air. But—I have to be honest with you—most of the time we are also asking ourselves, “What, in God’s name, have we done? There is a wild animal living with us!” She has chewed up three pairs of our son’s eyeglasses, one of our daughter’s retainers, and a brand-new ottoman in our family room. There have been nights when she cried and howled most of the time, and we’re still not able to let her loose in the kitchen for long because she knows exactly how to grab our food when we turn our heads away. I know they say dogs are man’s best friend but at this point it feels like we are in constant conflict about who really controls the house. When will we find lasting peace? Are people really meant to live in complete harmony with these creatures? Our puppy-trainer is excellent, but even she explains how the secret to success of raising a good dog companion is to establish and maintain your dominance and get them used to being out of your bubble. Harmonious relationships between humans and people doesn’t just automatically happen.

In that case, we should be especially impressed with and astonished by what we encounter as Jesus is driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness after his baptism. There he is, forty days in the harsh environment, with all kinds of wild beasts happily in his bubble. These aren’t puppies or dogs, either. These are all kinds of fearsome and dangerous animals that would have normally devoured a lone, unarmed person like Jesus—wolves, leopards, wild boars. Ancient Israel even had lions. It’s kind of funny, if you think about it. We sing all kinds of hymns and carols at Christmastime about the friendly beasts who come to tend to Jesus at his birth in the manger, but the only time that Scripture ever talks about animals being with Jesus is at his temptation in the wilderness.

We may see this as a strange and endearing feature to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, an easy to overlook aspect of Jesus’ very first steps, but for those who have ever longed for a broken world to be put to rights, this is the first powerful sign that day has arrived. A wilderness is being turned into a Paradise. God had once before cleansed the wicked world through a flood, giving Noah and all the animals of the earth a new beginning. The heavens had opened and hope had shone through in the form of a rainbow. A dove had gone out and hovered over safe ground. Now, once again, water is bringing about a new world. The heavens open and a dove hovers over someone steady and sure, a new foundation.

In the baptism of Jesus and his subsequent temptation in the wilderness, a brand new day has begun. God has boldly announced a new chapter—the final chapter—in God’s plan to reconcile the entire cosmos to God’s self. And, strangely, before Jesus has called even his first disciple, the wild beasts are gathering around him as a sign of the peacefulness and promise to

come. He doesn't even have to enlist an expert puppy trainer. They just know. Eden has been regained.

How about you? Do you feel the draw to gather around Jesus, to respond to his announcement that the kingdom of God has come near? Do you, too, long for a fresh beginning, a total do-over in life, or maybe just today? Have you ever been adrift like Noah on the ark, searching the skies for a sign of hope? The good news from the gospels is that in Jesus this fresh start, this new beginning, is always possible, for each and every one of us. Your age does not matter. Your background does not matter. In Jesus, God has come to contend with the fears, the temptations, the dark forces that estrange all people from God and the good God desires for us. This new day begins that moment by the Jordan River and reaches its conclusion at the cross in a new flood of grace where God's own Son takes all the sin of the world and drowns it in love. He is driven into our most godforsaken territories and turns them into a Paradise.

For the sinner, this is made real in the waters of baptism, regardless of our age when that occurred. Whether we were a tiny infant or a college student or an older adult, our baptism is a sign that we've been forever included in this new covenant established by Jesus' life and death. God has guaranteed our place in that new creation even if we wander from its promise or were just too young to remember what it meant—even if we, at times, behave or carry on as if that new birth never happened. Out of God's grace we are chosen and gathered as children from all ends of the earth. Each time we reflect on our own baptisms we are reflecting on just how powerful and permanent God's love for creation is: Jesus has himself driven to the wilderness to save it. Jesus will die on the cross to restore it and rises again from its darkness to show its power. And so baptism is a chance to begin again. Even the act of remembering it, as Martin Luther says, is a chance to start our lives anew and, once again, take part in the kingdom of peace and righteousness that Jesus has begun.

One Easter in the first congregation I served we baptized a man who was in his fifties. He had first ventured into our congregation with his wife earlier that year, in January, after having driven by the front door regularly for about six months. It took him that long, I later found out, before he finally got up the nerve to come inside. I think we church people can forget that. It takes many people a lot of courage just to enter church doors. We used that Lent as a time to have some intentional conversations about his life and his faith and where he perceived God's presence in his life. We came to the conclusion that it was time for him to be baptized. For reasons unknown to him, his parents had never taken that step with him when he was young.

That Sunday, as the water was poured over his head, a new thing for that congregation occurred. He began to weep. It caught everyone by surprise, although perhaps it shouldn't have. The people in the choir, who were standing nearest to him by virtue of the way our chancel was set up, were affected by his visible show of emotion. Some of them began to cry too, confronted with the seemingly un-Lutheran reality of a grown man moved to tears in worship, and in such an open way. I'll never forget a comment one of them made after worship was over and she reflected on the event. "It was like it meant something to him," she said.

Indeed, something had happened. There was a new creation. We watched over the next months and years as the splash created by his baptism rippled throughout the entire congregation, just as the same grace ripples throughout any congregation whenever a pastor cradles a new baby in his arms at the font. People began sharing a bit more about their own faith, their own God-given chances to start over. Something is happening in the life of Jesus Christ, the likes of which this whole world has never experienced or seen before. No matter how or when we travel

through the flood waters of baptism, God's purposes are made clear: Jesus is on the scene. He has come to gather us.

And even when powerful emotion is not there in our faith, even when we traverse the long days of wilderness when we doubt and wander, it is still true that the days when sin and death have the final word are now behind us. That time is no more. God has claimed us for his grand new restoration project on earth, and each person—be they young or old, be they intimidated by the front doors of church or as comfortable in a pew as on their family room sofa—each person has the Spirit-given gifts to join in on the effort.

This does not mean, it should be noted, that the Christian life will be easy, that taking part in this restoration flood will be free of tests and trials. After all, once his own baptism happens, Jesus is driven by the Spirit not into a field of daisies, but straight into Satan's tests. As member of his body, we should expect the same type of experience, for we are subjects of a kingdom whose existence and goodness is not yet completely acknowledged by the whole world. Temptation is a regular part of the baptized life.

And we should also note that our gatherings will be gatherings of different-minded people, with different backgrounds and sometimes conflicting points of view. But because Christ is a new creation, the church can be together as diverse people who don't devour each other like wild beasts. We learn to see those different from us not as threats, but as beautiful creatures of God who add to our human experience, who help populate a kingdom that includes all kinds. This is what the world will seek and be drawn to.

In one of his books, former Divinity School professor and United Methodist bishop Will Willimon tells the story of a newspaper clipping he once read about a woman somewhere in Louisiana who raised somewhere around a dozen foster children despite her low, meager income as a domestic worker. Why did she do it? Why did she suffer so? She responded, "I saw a new world a comin'."¹

A new world is comin'. As far as Mark is concerned, the animals might already know it. You can see it in the life-giving ministry and hopes of people in this very Synod. By the grace of God, we have a new beginning in Jesus Christ. It starts with a splash, then forms a ripple, until all of creation is caught up in the flood. Get ready. Turn around! And believe in the good news!"

Thanks be to God!

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¹ Will Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. P127