

## *Traveling the Wilderness Road*

First Sunday in Lent  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 9:8-17; Isaiah 55:6, 10-11;  
1 Peter 8:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

An old priest in Russia in the days of the Tsars was stopped by a Royal guard. Pointing a gun, the guard asked gruffly: "What is your name? Why are you here? Where are you going?"

The priest looked at the soldier and asked, "How much do they pay you to ask these questions?" The soldier replied, "Three kopeks a month." "I'll pay you 30 kopeks a month if you will stop me every week and ask me the same three questions," the priest said.

Those questions might well be put to us this morning, don't you think? What's your name? Why are you here? Where are you going?

Oh of course we all know who we are. We might have trouble knowing whose we are, but we all know who we are. After all, we know our name, don't we? We received our names when we were baptized, so that's fairly well taken care of.

But our answer to the second question, Why are we here? Because the music department of Thiel College required it? Because your wife dragged you here? Because you felt you ought to be here? Probably we might say we are here because we chose to come to worship God on the first Sunday in Lent. But behind that simple answer lies a much more complex question, "Why ARE we here?" Or, on an even deeper level, "What is the purpose of our being?" And most perplexing of all, "Where on earth are we going?" It's a profound question that asks much more than "Where will I be after the service?"

Had Jesus been asked these as He rose dripping wet from the baptismal immersion John had given Him, how would He have answered? Would He have identified Himself as Jesus, of Nazareth? Or would He have shared the divine and privileged communication that He – and only He – received as He rose from the baptismal waters of the Jordan, that He was the beloved Son of God, and that God was well pleased with Him? Why was he there? To be baptized? To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? To equip Him for what lay ahead?

I'm not at all sure at this point in the story, that He really knew where He was going since, according to Mark, the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness; it didn't invite Him. And immediately, still wet, Jesus' journey had begun.

But then, beloved, you and I, we too have begun a journey today. Oh, I know, it's a journey many or most or all of us have taken before. Many of us have stood at this point many times, every year for many years. So, how do we do it this year? I think the lessons this morning invite

us to begin with our baptism, in which we received our Christian name and at the same time were gifted with all the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit.

Later, when we were confirmed, when we affirmed our baptism, we ourselves took the promises which our parents had taken on our behalf. You see, in a sense, standing at the beginning of our Lenten journey is no different than standing at the opening of any new and ordinary day. In both cases, we are challenged with the calling to live out of our baptism and to work to fulfill the promises we have made. But that is not as simple as it may sound, is it? At least, if we really take the task seriously.

We might say that Jesus leads the way when he enters the wilderness. But He is not alone. Although He is confronted with the wild beasts, angels were present to minister to Him.

Ages before, the Children of Israel journeyed in and through the wilderness. Do you remember the story? The wilderness scene where God revealed Himself to his people, where He made a covenant them at Sinai. The wilderness was the place where God cared for and fed his people with manna, and when they protested that, with quail. The wilderness was the place where God forged his people into a strong nation who could go up and take the Promised Land. Is God forging us in a fiery furnace wilderness to strengthen us to be His instruments of grace and channels of His love to our world?

Of course, at the same time, the wilderness was the scene of many rebellions against God. If the wilderness was thought of as a place of faith and piety, it also brought out the worst in some people and led them away from faith. For that reason alone the wilderness could be regarded as a place to be feared. Even if God was there, so were wild beasts and all sorts of demons and even, Mark says, Satan himself. The wilderness was the arena where one could sense dramatically the presence of both. But – rather than being defeated, Jesus emerges strengthened for all that lay ahead of Him. We are familiar, are we not, with the story of His journey; His life with all its celebrations and trials. Yet for our sake and comfort, He was in the wilderness. For our sake He endured tremendous suffering. For our sake He wandered into the wilderness of the garden of Gethsemane, and then through trial, humiliation and scourging, all the way to the cross.

And that's where we go too, isn't it beloved? To walk in His footsteps. To know ourselves by our name and whose we are, the beloved children. Named and filled with the Spirit, we are sent forth not only to journey into and through Lent with its rigor of self-discipline and examination, but into and through all that lies ahead of us.

Let's not fool ourselves. It isn't an easy journey, it's not be a cake walk, but our Lenten discipline and our weekly worship with word and sacrament is all part of molding, shaping and upholding us for the greater journey.

He said to me, "Here's a map for the journey ahead. But there are some things the map doesn't tell that you need to know. The road has some sharp turns that are not marked well in advance and you'll come upon them quite unexpectedly and they'll change your course. There are often other travelers on the road who care only for themselves – you need to watch out for yourself and

for them. And there are some bad places in the road that pose great and mortal danger to you. The scenery in some places is breathtaking, but you will need to keep moving.

Despite these words of warning, and while it can be exceptionally difficult and challenging at times, it is a wonderful journey. But, why not? Why not just follow me? I've been on that road before. And now, beloved, now we can travel it together.

Amen.