

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
February 21, 2021
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There is a funny comic in a recent New Yorker Magazine. The husband is writing a check to pay the bills. He says to his wife, "It's 2021, but I'm still writing 'yearlong fever dream of chaos and despair' on my checks."

Funny. I don't think that is true though. I think things are getting better. I suppose it depends on where you are from though. People in Texas perhaps think that the chaos and despair continue. A two-year old was found in a dumpster on Friday. Clearly, we are not immune from devastation and difficulty even here in Wyoming. A military plane crashed in Alabama. An engine of the 777 exploded over Broomfield, Colorado yesterday. Life is filled with ups and downs, twisting us from side to side, with moments of stability and moments of instability, peace and wilderness. And now we are in Lent. With that, I offer you a Collect from the Book of Common Prayer, a Prayer of Self-Dedication, as we wade into humility and fasting, the wilderness. Let us pray:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

As we learned in the gospel reading, Jesus is preparing himself for what is about to come, and he knows it is going to be difficult. He is preparing himself for life, particularly for the challenges that come with it. And as Jesus prepares himself for a life of ministry, a life of helping and loving others, a life of faithfulness, the first thing he does is get baptized. The first thing he does is receive help from God.

In Episcopal settings, we get baptized, then confirmed by the bishop when we are of age. Jesus is of age and ready to begin his life of service. In baptism, God covers him with the Holy and Healing and Helping Spirit. In baptism, Jesus is washed clean and now dedicated to active service and love in the Lord.

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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." As Jesus, as any of us, are baptized, God affirms and reminds us how pleased he is with us. God reminds us that he, in fact, is with us and with us for life. The Spirit descending upon Jesus at baptism also affirms that he will be going through suffering and will be in need of the Spirit.

In our baptism liturgy, after getting baptized, I anoint the person and say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." God with us, Christ with us, salvation is forever, regardless of what kind of life we choose to live.

When Jesus is baptized, God then affirms that he is his Son, the suffering servant, whom God will bring salvation to the nations as promised by the prophet Isaiah (42:1). The apocalyptic symbolism, the open heavens (Isa 63:19), the descent of the Spirit, and the divine voice also call attention to the fact that Jesus will be the agent of salvation. He is the one promised by the prophets, the one people have been waiting for.

The first part of our life with the Lord is that the Lord prepares us for what is next. He prepares us for a life of love and service, a life of faithfulness. This does not require us to tackle life on our own. We can try, but God does not intend for that to happen. He intends for us to be baptized and prepared. And when we are baptized, God, as he rejoices, proclaims that he is well pleased! With Jesus, God also affirms that salvation has come.

Next, life comes at us fast. The scripture says that immediately the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness of life for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; but the angels waited on him.

Notice a couple of things: First, that life is a test, multiple tests, in fact. And these tests can be very difficult. Satan is working against us. There are wild beasts, or wild challenges, pitfalls, temptations and sin, all around us. The preparation was important. If we are not prepared, we will fall, and, at times, fall hard. In fact, even if we are prepared, we can fall. Life is filled with tests and wilderness. That is Lent. Second, notice the theme of 40 days in the wilderness. The Israelites would have remembered the 40 years being in the desert after leaving Egypt. God is giving them context, reminding them that he was with them then and he will be with them now. Third, notice that the angels waited on him. So, life can be difficult, but God gives us context while in the middle of challenges, and, God sends angels who wait upon us like servants, like helpers. God does not abandon us, ever. Our God is with us, helping us to put the pieces in place for us to take those tiny steps, and occasional leaps, in life.

Before I jump into the third part of this message, I am curious how has God prepared you? Have you been baptized, confirmed? What other preparations has God given you? Have there been certain people in your life? Who? Have there been certain experiences that have helped prepare you? Second, how has the wilderness been going for you? Is it still happening, or are you preparing to walk into it? Tell me about the angels. What angels have waited upon you, protected and helped you? God never abandons us.

We now come to the third part of the message which is that once Jesus is prepared, once Jesus has walked in the wilderness with Satan and wild beasts, and yet been tended too by the angels, he is now ready to begin his work for the Lord as the Son of God. He proclaims the good news of God. In other words, life with God is good news. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. Once again, apocalyptic language. People had been waiting for the end times, the time when the Son of God would reverse the story of sinful humanity. Jesus is basically saying that it is time, time to turn to the Lord and believe. And from John's story of being arrested, we are reminded that Jesus' work, any work for the Lord for any of us, can be dangerous. There

can be great and/or small consequences. In Jesus' and John's case, it was martyrdom, death.

What is your work for the Lord? What good are you doing in the world? And what have been the consequences?

I was baptized as a baby, then confirmed in seventh grade. We shifted churches in high school and they required me to be confirmed again. I guess I needed a little more help and preparation. I really feel like my whole life has been training, even wilderness. I sometimes wonder whether the angels are with me. And yet they are. It may just not feel that way all the time. Fortunately, life is more than feelings and emotions. Life is also knowledge and commitment and challenge and picking ourselves up when we fall, with the Lord's help. God then led me through school, eventually an economics and business degree, then on into the banking world, then through graduate school, seminary. God led me to meet Caroline, then marry her and have two daughters, and a dog, then another dog. He gave me friends and success' and failures and hope and love beyond any difficulties. As many of you know, I was in an accident and in the hospital for a few months about twenty years ago. God led me to St. Mark's and here we are, walking together, through a pandemic, through political ups and downs, together at a church steeped in tradition and strength and faith, a steady ship in a turbulent world.

What is your story? What is your commitment to the Lord? As we continue to walk through Lent, may your life of training and fasting lead you through the wilderness with the Lord and into the new open doors that God has for you.

"Yearlong fever dream of chaos and despair?" Maybe, but with our Lord, we will get through and go on to share love with the world.