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Sunday of the First Week of Lent (B)

In the readings from Scripture today we are presented with two paradoxical landscapes: the waters of death and the life-giving desert. When we ordinarily think of a desert, rarely do we think of it as giving life or even as sustaining life, aside from a prickly cactus or two. In the same manner, when we think of water, one of the first things that come to mind is that water sustains and gives life, not that it gives death. Last week when I taught the senior class at St. Anthony's high school briefly on baptism and as I asked them about the qualities of water, its ability to give and sustain life was top on the list. But we all know well what else water is capable of doing.

Today in the Gospel, Jesus is called out into the desert by the Spirit, the "wasteland" where he stayed for forty days (Mark 1:12). The dry, barren, and lifeless desert. The Spirit of God - the same Spirit who descended upon him in the waters of the Jordan just moments before when the voice was heard, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11). This same Spirit drives him now out to spend quite a length of time in the land of death where Satan would put him to the test and he would live with the "wild beasts" (Mark 1:13). But just what are these wild beasts? Scorpions and cobras and other creatures

of the desert? Perhaps, but I think Mark is trying to tell us something much greater than that Jesus simply lived with the animals. There is something more to these wild beasts than the creepy, crawling things of the earth, for why would angels wait on Jesus merely for sleeping near a snake for a night or two?

Rather, these beasts are the various temptations that each of us face each day of our lives. Matthew and Luke expound a bit on these temptings of Satan, while Mark does not. We know that Jesus is like us in all things but sin, and we know that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are today. Only he did not succumb to the temptations, as do we. These wild beasts of the desert are the same beasts we encounter in the desert of Lent. They are the same sins we face each day of our lives, whether they be greed, gluttony, sloth, adultery, theft, gossip, or lies. Jesus wrestled with each of these beasts in the desert and he conquered each one of them giving rise to the life-giving waters of the Spirit.

But why would the Spirit of God drive Jesus out into this desert of temptation in the first place? Why would the Father, who was well pleased with his Son, send Jesus to the desert? As punishment? Simply to test him? Certainly not!

Jesus spent forty days in the desert for the very same reason he was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist: to fully share in our humanity. Through his baptism by John,

Jesus accepted our human condition, without removing his divine nature and dignity. In his temptations in the desert, Jesus not only unites himself with us as he did in his baptism, but he undergoes the very same aspects of human life we seek to avoid in the desert. He came to us as we are to call us to him and to reform our lives. As Peter reminds us today, "For Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteousness, that he might lead you to God" (I Peter 3:18).

As the angels ministered to him in the desert - just as they had ministered to the people of Israel in the desert and to Elijah - Jesus prepared for what he knew would come from his time in the desert. He knew that the desert prepared him for his mission, for when he emerged from the land of death that paradoxically gave him life to carry out his purpose, he boldly proclaimed, "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15)!

This same message was preached to the people of Noah's day and none but Noah and his family heeded the message. The waters of the flood came and destroyed all that was, all except for that which was on the ark. Through the waters of the flood the earth was recreated; all was washed clean and made new. We know well what Peter reminds us of today, that the waters of the flood "prefigured baptism, which saves [us] now" (I Peter 3:21).

Through baptism, the saving waters of death cleanse us of our sins and recreate us; in the waters of death we are given new life.

Only a few short days ago we placed ashes on our foreheads as a sign of repentance and as a willingness to reform our lives. We heard the call from the Lord in the words of the prophet Joel to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." The ashes are a mark of the desert, a mark of the temptations that each of us faces each day of our lives. Our struggles this Lent in the desert will give way to the waters of the flood, the waters that will destroy our old selves and give new life to us in the waters of death, the waters of baptism.

For us today, the drought of the desert leads to the waters of new birth. All that we do this Lent during our forty days in the desert is to help us repent of our sins and to turn toward the Lord in his mercy and love. He wants nothing more than for us to turn back to him with our whole heart. These days of increased prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are to lead us to the joy of Easter, to the saving waters of death when we will renew our baptismal promises with those are baptized into the life-giving death of Christ Jesus. And the angels will be with us, ministering to us as they did to the people of old, leading us and guiding us back to God.

Today is the time of fulfillment! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but *today*. Why wait? *Today* is the time to reform our lives and to believe in the good news. And what is this good news? It is this: the desert leads to life; the waters of death give life. Our penitential acts this Lent - our praying, fasting, alms-giving - will give way to new life. As we "repent, and believe in the good news," we will draw ever closer to the Lord and experience his love and concern for us in a deeper way than before. Our spiritual life will be renewed as our journey through the desert leads us to the waters of baptism. The land of the desert leads to new life. In baptism, we died with the Lord, only to be raised as a new creation to live with him and to share in his resurrection. The waters of death lead to new life. And so, as we continue our Lenten practices this week let us say with David, "I will wash my hands in innocence and walk round your altar, LORD, Lifting my voice in thanks, recounting all your wondrous deeds" (Psalm 26:7-8).