

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 4:1–11

Sermon: “Baptism to the Wilderness”

Jesus goes straight from the triumph of his Baptism to the wilderness to undergo temptation. He is led to the wilderness by the Spirit. This is not an accidental wilderness wandering, but an intentional act that identifies him with Israel of old. Through his undergoing temptation and declining to be enticed by our enemy, he remakes Israel in himself.

Where Israel falls to temptation, Jesus holds fast to the Word of God. He will not accept the big “if” but confesses his Father and keeps the First Commandment as the head of them all.

Just before going into the wilderness, Jesus is baptized by the reluctant Baptizer. John would have preferred that he should be baptized by Jesus, not Jesus by John. But in typical style, John did not know what he was saying. He could only think of the privilege and benefit of being baptized by the Son of God, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. About that, he was right. Certainly, he was right.

But this Baptism of Jesus was to be different. This Baptism was also Jesus' messianic "ordination"; it was a public induction into the office of Messiah. It was to set the name of Father upon the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, launching him upon his work as the Savior of the world. His ministerial career was at its pristine beginning. He was now to begin the work of saving the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

On this point, John miscalculated. The Baptism experienced by Jesus brought him face-to-face with his enemy and our enemy, the tempter.

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came" (vs 1–3).

Jesus is baptized into a bad deal. Surf fishermen say it's important to put your catch on a long stringer in case the wounded fish attract sharks. Usually a stringer should be six feet long. If the fisherman gets tangled in the stringer, the shark also might treat him as food. When Jesus stands in the Jordan, his Father has set him on a fishing expedition, to make fishers of men. He's looking for a big catch, of both good and bad.

Jesus' Baptism wrapped him in the stringer of fish. The shark veers straight for him. Because he fills his Baptism with all righteousness, the water is colored crimson, the cleansing blood infusing every font. No wonder the satanic shark glides toward him with the triple-toothy smile of slaughter. Jesus is like a weak and wounded fish, caught on the stringer of our sins. He no sooner comes forth from the water when, driven by the Holy Spirit, he goes out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Here is the life-devouring and death-dealing enemy of all humans cruising in to make the kill on God's Son, who is the only life worth consuming. And if this one life falls, everyone becomes shark bait. *"If you are the Son of God,"* the devil says—and repeats it.

Jesus does not stumble into this confrontation with man's enemy accidentally. He knows it's coming. He's planning on it. He seeks it. He yearns for it. He desires it with every fiber of his being. He is about the righteousness that must be so, as he says to John. And not just that. He *is* the righteousness that must be so. The kingdom of God is defined by his righteousness, but that righteousness is the enemy's enemy.

The satanic shark knows that the Lamb's life must be kept from us. He must be deflected, bumped off course, devoured, and destroyed. The cosmic battle for all souls was joined in Baptism's waters. Then it spilled out into the wilderness of sin, where the Son of God battles our fearsome enemy.

In every Baptism, we repeat that scene. The Son has laced the water with his blood through the Word. Those who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ and his crucifixion. They are wrapped in the blood that saves. ***“Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ”*** (Ephesians 2:13), because the blood of Christ has been brought near to you in the baptismal font. It gives life because it covers us. ***“The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin”*** (1 John 1:7).

But just as Jesus' Baptism spread the waters with blood, so our Baptism also attracts the devil. Those already in his maw he has no need to devour. We who have been baptized into the new life instantly become targets of temptation.

It can't be any other way; those who have become children of God in the washing of regeneration will face attacks from the master of degeneration. The devil does us the compliment of attacking us. He leaves alone those already among the living dead. So, if you want peace in this world, best renounce your Baptism. Baptism attracts our enemy, who desires to kill the life given by the Life of the world.

I know that can make parent's heart cringe as we baptize infants. We prefer to hope the child's life will be all sweetness and light. But we would be foolish to say so. Think of our own battles with temptation. When has the tempter ever let you alone? When has he ceased harassing, berating, or accusing you? Can we always see the promised land? Can we slap the shark on the snout so that he swims away forever? What then would make one think that Satan would leave alone our baptized little ones? If the Son of God has been treated this way, what makes us think that any of us young or old will get a pass from the father of lies?

We, like Moses, will die east of the Jordan, knowing that the Promised Land is just over there, and only then, dying in faith, will we enter the peace and rest that is our inheritance through Christ. Though the victory has been won, Baptism still has us in the midst of battle. The experience of our Lord says so. He was led into the wilderness following Baptism. He enters into his divine office only to face immediately the onslaught of the evil one. It is no different for us. Life in the world becomes harder from here on out for the baptized, because we live in the wilderness of sin. Like Israel, we walk forty years awaiting God's ultimate rescue in the promised land, dying little by little until we are the people God wants us to be, and in the end falling asleep in the arms of Christ.

How shall we then live in the midst of such attacks? How shall we live in wilderness with the Savior? With what shall we ward off the enemy's approach to devour our little ones? Every word that comes from the mouth of God. The Word of God is a great weapon against the onslaughts of the liar. Why? Because the Word of God is the truth. We combat the lie with the truth.

We set the holy catechism on our child's lips. We bring them to Sunday School. Help them live with every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Not opinion. Not entertainment. Not even religious opinion. Not with mere Law: Do not taste. Do not touch. But with the eternal Gospel of life, that their sins have been taken away in Christ through his bloody death. Teach her that. And we do these things with all who are entrusted to our care.

We commend them to the care of our heavenly Father who will always guard our lives against the attacks of Satan. Do we always remember how our Father is protecting us, especially in the midst of our trials? No, but He is. And He always will. He will send his holy angels to guard us in all his ways.

The baptismal font is the entrance of the church. We pass through it to enter in. We pass by it to return to the wilderness. Into the water and out again. Only with its power can we walk away from the altar. Only its power will draw us back to the altar. But it will also attract the devouring deceiver.

That is the way it will be, until we pass into the promised land of perfect peace in Christ, when Baptism's down payment of death is redeemed with its full life.

Baptism gives the full Christ to us so that we now bear the name "sons of God." We have the full deal in him. But the full deal attracts the enemy, too, like those who win the lottery suddenly have more friends and relatives than they had ever known they had before. And yet there is only one direction to go: out. Out into the wilderness. Out into the world. In it. Not of it. To serve there. To minister to those who also need Baptism and to bring them in. The Holy Spirit also drives us out into the wilderness. How does the Christian face the temptations of the devil and the world? By remembering our Baptism and remembering who we are and whose we are in Christ. Satan is our enemy. One little word can fell him: I am baptized.

Amen