

Sermon – January 10, 2021
“You Are Beloved”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 1:4-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good Morning! Welcome to everyone here in person and to those who are joining us on the live stream. How are those New Year's resolutions going for everyone? Anyone still keeping any of your resolutions? I do hope that many of you are reading through the Bible this year. It is never too late to begin. Let me encourage you to begin that discipline if you have not. Strive to be one who reads God's word each day. We have begun to gather once again for Bible study and are being astonished by what we are discovering in God's word. Our contact and prayer groups are again reaching out to the members of the congregation and then gathering online for a time of prayer over the needs of our congregation. If you would like to be part of this group, let me know and I will get you a list of people to call and check on and then include you in the prayer time. I hope that you have gotten a printed copy of your covenant renewal, signed it, and have it in a place where you can read it on a regular basis. Making a covenant is one step, but keeping it throughout the year, like our resolutions, can be a challenge. Put a copy of the covenant in a place where you can read it through regularly and then pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us into a deeper engagement with the agreements of the covenant. Finally, I want to celebrate and encourage those who have begun to seek new relationships with families in need. Please consider taking an envelope from the altar and begin filling it with funds and letting the Holy Spirit guide you into a new relationship with the intention of giving them the card and funds next December. Let's also celebrate that we now have a COVID vaccine, and let me remind us that we have not yet all received that vaccine and, until we do, we need to be very cautious. Please continue wearing your masks when you are out of your homes and keep physical separation from others. Exposure to the virus is a real and growing possibility here in the Northern Neck and we need to be diligent for a bit longer. Let's turn now and look at today's scripture in more detail.

For over three hundred years, no new prophet had emerged in the land of Israel. No new voice in the wilderness had arisen calling Israel to repentance and a return to God. Many in Israel had begun to hold that the age of the prophets had ended and there would be no more mighty men of God called to challenge the people of Israel to repent of their sins and return to a relationship with God. Even though the scriptures held the promise of another prophet like Moses to arise in Israel in the last days at the end of time when the coming judgement of God arrived, there did not seem to be many who believed that this was to be the case. Many in Israel had again given up on the words of scripture and were turning to other gods. Others held to their understanding of the sufficiency of worship of God in the temple and sought to encounter God there. And then one day, a man showed up east of Jerusalem, calling people to come out to the wilderness, repent, be baptized, and find forgiveness. This man was said to be wearing a cloak of camel's hair and a leather belt. He was one who ate the food of the wilderness, locusts and wild honey. It seemed a new prophet was to be found in Israel.

Two summers ago, I spent a week as a camp pastor at Westview on the James and discovered that one of the days they celebrated each week was super hero day. It was a day when you were supposed to wear something that reminded you of your favorite super hero. During this day, I discovered that many of the youth present could recite the words of super hero movies by memory. By contrast, in first century Israel, the people would have been able to recite much of the Old Testament from memory. They spent their days in the words of the Old Testament, so when a man appeared in the wilderness dressed in this manner, word traveled like wildfire through Israel that a prophet like one of the prophets of old had arisen. The silence of three hundred plus years was broken; a prophet had arisen in Israel. They would not have needed to search the scriptures to know that the camel's hair garment and leather belt marked this new prophet as one like the great prophet Elijah. They would have known the story from the Old Testament of how when Ahaziah's servants encountered a man on the road who told them prophetic words about their king and they brought those words to the king and he then asked them the name of the prophet, they could not answer for the man had not given them his name. Instead, they replied that he wore camel's hair and a leather belt, and from this description, Ahaziah recognized this prophet as Elijah, the Tishbite.

The people of Israel would also have known that when another prophet arose that it would mark the beginning of the end of time, and so they would have been filled with anticipation of what God might be doing. Imagine for a moment if all of our news feeds and social messaging systems lit

up today with the news that the end of time was at hand. What would we do? If the news feeds and social messaging systems were to proclaim the end of the earth and the heavens due to some catastrophic coming event that was only a few weeks away, what would we do? This question reminds me of a comic that once circulated of two men sitting in a small boat fishing and in the background, there were many mushroom clouds rising ominously upward. The caption under the cartoon read, "I know what it means, Frank, there are no size restrictions and no limit on how many fish we can catch." Our fisherman's response in this comic is one of the responses to the certain coming of the end of time, indulgence. Some would, in response to such news, indulge themselves, eating whatever they wanted, drinking what they desired, and doing what they desired, without care for the consequences. Life is about to end, so they would indulge themselves. Another different response should be found among those who have some belief in God. They would know that with the end of time comes judgement, and with the arrival of a prophet, the time of judgement is at hand. They would know that a righteous judge was soon to come and judgement would be swift and final, with God's wrath being poured out on those who are not in a right relationship with God. The response of these with such knowledge would be to seek to be in a right relationship with God, and so they would respond to the message of the prophet and go out into the wilderness, listen to his words, respond to his call to repent, and be baptized with the muddy water of the Jordan, seeking to be those found by the coming judge as those who are in a right relationship with God.

John's cry in the wilderness is a cry Israel would recognize. It is to the wilderness that God brought the Hebrews when he first made them His sons, when he came to them on the mountain in the wilderness and adopted them as His people. Israel would recognize a call in the wilderness by a prophet as a call to something new, another call to return to a right relationship with God. And so they would go, listen, repent, and be baptized in the hope of returning and becoming God's people at last. If we know Israel's history, we know that many times they have heard this call and responded only to stray from God again. It takes something more than the dirty water of the Jordan to wash away their sins and to make them God's people. But those who heard of John's cry would go searching for a right relationship with God. John's call to repent may be familiar to Israel, but water baptism was a new aspect of this prophet. Baptism with water marks something new occurring in connection with a call to return to God. There is something different about this call of Israel back into relationship with God. God is doing something new for his people.

Into the mass of humanity from Judea who have answered the prophet's call comes one from another place, from Galilee. As readers of Mark's gospel, we are given only this insight about Jesus. He comes to be baptized by John. There is no indication that John is aware of Jesus' presence, nor even that John recognizes Jesus. Jesus comes and joins this crowd of sinners, identifying with them as he identifies with us today. Jesus, who needs no repentance, comes humbly to the wilderness as one of the crowd with whom he identifies as those seeking God in response to this new prophet's call. John is clearly aware that one is coming, and that one is far greater than himself. John admits he baptizes with water but there is one among them whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, an action considered so humbling that Hebrew slaves were not required to do so for their earthly masters. John is aware that this one among them, present in their midst, will baptize them with the Holy Spirit, a far greater baptism than the muddy Jordan water he uses. Holy Spirit baptism will enable them not only to repent of their sins, but to be healed, empowered, and to become those who are recreated into a new people, the people of God.

Jesus comes not to find salvation for himself or to flee from the wrath of God that is to come by the establishment of a right relationship with God. Jesus comes to join in the renewal of people that has begun with Israel's response to John the Baptist, a response that will grow to reveal God's plan for salvation of all people. Just as Jesus will humble himself and die for sinners, here he comes and is among the ranks of sinners, standing with them in life as he will also be with them in death. Baptism for Jesus is a launching of his journey of obedience that will lead to his death, that there may be eternal life reconciled to God for those with whom he identifies in life. Just as the crowd and John are unaware of his presence and do not hear the testimony of God to his beloved son, so also will Jesus die isolated and alone for sinners. Jesus' coming to be baptized by John is not for him to find forgiveness, but represents his complete turning to God's mission, his complete response to God's will for the Son.

The crowd does not respond to Jesus' baptism. They also seem to be unaware of what has occurred, and John continues to baptize as if the one to come has not yet arrived. However, as Jesus leaves the water, the heavens are not opened, but torn or rent, giving to him a glimpse of the holy, and from heaven come words of affirmation of the Son's willingness to enter fully into the Father's plan for salvation. Jesus alone hears the words from the Father, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This affirmation from heaven solidifies Jesus' knowledge of who he is and that he will be the one to face God's judgement. Those who have come out to the wilderness in

fear of facing the coming wrath of God will be given the Son to bear God's judgement. And so, with his baptism with the dirty water of the Jordan, which does not wash clean, but which marks Jesus' submission to this act of repentance and God's will for the Son, Jesus begins his journey into God's will, to bring salvation to all people, to suffer and die that we may be reconciled to God.

It is also at this moment, as Jesus steps out of the water and the heavens are rent and God affirms the Beloved, that the Spirit descends, not in the form of a dove, but with the motion of a dove, gently landing and resting on Jesus. Jesus will now be the one who baptizes with fire, with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that now rests upon the Word made flesh.

There are two questions that we may seek answers to in light of Jesus' baptism: "What does the baptism of Jesus mean for us today?" and "What does this event that Mark outlines in his gospel have to do with us and the life we are seeking to live in this place at this time?"

First, it means that with Jesus' baptism something new has begun, and we can also be part of it. The results of the baptism of Jesus and his entrance into God's mission for us allow us to become a people truly reconciled to God. Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of the end, the coming of the kingdom of God. The beginning of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. The coming of a new creation. The new creation that Jesus brings, that starts with his baptism in the wilderness, is still renewing, transforming, and redeeming today. We can each be part of this new creation through belief in Jesus Christ.

Second, we are called to come out into the wilderness, not to flee the wrath of God, but to set aside our sins, believe in Jesus, walk with him to the cross, and enter into a new relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. We are called to be a people recreated in the wilderness into a people of God. Our response is to hear God's word, repent of sin that clings to us, and seek to set aside all that distracts us in the world that we might go with Christ and join him in his mission, even a mission that requires us to suffer. This is the journey that Jesus agrees to when he comes to submit to John's baptism. He comes as a humble repentant one who is among sinners then, today, and forever.

Third, there is now a greater empowering baptism, baptism in the Holy Spirit, that we can receive. The Holy Spirit has descended and rested on Jesus, and he is the one who can baptize us with fire, with the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit is given in our water baptism by Jesus. Yet there is no limit to the amount of the Holy Spirit we can receive if we will ask for it and be open to receiving this empowering gift from Jesus throughout our lives. This is the transforming

power that not only washes us clean of our sins through the shed blood of Jesus, but empowers us so to live our lives that we may overcome and break the chains of sin that bind us. This is the Spirit that was poured out at Pentecost and is still being poured out on all believers today. We are to be those who are seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit, those whose lives are daily being transformed into the life of Christ. This is our own “going on to sanctification.” We are not left with the repentance and salvation that come with belief in Christ, but are a people who are being remade in the wilderness into those who are the body of Christ. It is through the power of the coming of the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to become part of the new creation of God, made at last into a people of God.

Finally, we are to be prophetic voices in the wilderness. Right here and right now we are to be those dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt around our waist, inviting all of those who do not know Jesus as Lord into something new. We are not so much to cry out as a prophet as we are to allow the love of Christ in us to be the cry of one in the wilderness to our neighbors, friends, and family. We are to be the church, the body of Christ, who is among those fleeing the wrath to come as those who live and love others in a manner that the love of Christ is sown into the lives of all we meet. The wilderness today is the culture we live in, a culture that places its hope in the knowledge of super heroes that do not exist. It is a culture that increasingly is seeking government or science to make right what only God can restore. It is a culture that indulges itself and does not honor God. We are to be among those of the culture, but so filled with the love of Christ through the Holy Spirit that we point the way to God. This week, find a quiet place and simply ask the Holy Spirit to guide us into the wilderness of life and to empower us to begin to hear the cry of the lost and to go and be among them as those who are filled with the love of Christ. Come, Lord Jesus. Change us to be your people and guide us this day that others may find salvation through your love in our lives.

Pray with me: Lord, we have heard your call to come out into the wilderness and be remade into the children of the living God. Jesus, come and be among us, guide us on our journey, and send the Holy Spirit to fill us that we may go with you on your journey to bring salvation to all people. Lord, sanctify us that we might be your people, those who are about your mission right here, right now.