

The Time is Now

In the name of him who calls us to repent and believe the Good News, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel lesson sounds like déjà vu all over again. We heard most of it several weeks back at the beginning of the Epiphany season when we celebrated the Baptism of Jesus. Now here it is again as we are just starting Lent. Yes, they added a few more verses, including one we heard the Sunday after we celebrated Jesus' Baptism; but still, it's mostly a repeat. So, what's up with that? Why would the sharp theological minds that put together the lectionary do that to us?

One answer is that it never hurts to review Scripture. When we visit again, linger over, and meditate upon any passage of God's Word the Holy Spirit can and often does bring us to new and deeper insights. And while that's enough of a reason to come back to these verses, there's actually something else going on here. As we begin the season of Lent, we're being asked to step back and take a look at the broader picture as Jesus launches his public ministry. Yes, it begins when he's baptized and the voice from heaven announces his Father's approval; but note how immediately after his baptism, the Holy Spirit, who has just come upon him, drives him into the wilderness to face adversity and the vicious attacks of Satan. We're being told that from the very start of Jesus' mission, the war is on. He's here for a purpose. And it's not an easy one. He's here to engage the enemy and defeat him for us. And that struggle is going to cost him dearly. It's going to cost him his comfort, his safety, his sweat, toil, tears, and blood, and ultimately it's going to cost him his life. Jesus has a very difficult job to do, and we're being told from the get-go just how hard it's going to be for him.

For Jesus is here to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And that too is being made clear in the text, though it's maybe not so apparent to us who are looking at it with 21st century eyes. Folks with any biblical literacy in the 1st century would have seen it differently. They would have seen that the writer, St. Mark, is very deliberately drawing similarities and contrasts between Jesus and Old Testament Israel. The idea is that Jesus is Israel reduced to one man. And whereas the Israel of old was unfaithful and often failed to carry out the will of God, Jesus, the new Israel, is ever faithful and never fails to do his Father's will.

We see this right at the beginning of today's text. We read, "In those days Jesus came ... and was baptized by John in the Jordan." But we have to ask: in what days? For that we have to go to the preceding passage which says "all Jerusalem and the country of Judea were going out to John, and confessing their sins they were being baptized by him in the Jordan." You see the difference? Everyone else confesses their sins before being baptized. It doesn't say that about Jesus. It only says he was baptized. That's because he hasn't got any sins to confess. Unlike the rest of Israel, Jesus is faithful and obedient from the very beginning.

Note also that when these other folks get baptized ... well, we don't hear anything more about them. They return to their normal lives – *and* to their sinful ways. In their baptisms they heard John's proclamation of God's forgiveness, which was valid; but it didn't change them. Nothing changed about them. But look what happens when Jesus is baptized. The heavens are ripped open and the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove and remains upon him. Of course: in all of creation, Jesus is the only fit vessel to hold the Holy Spirit. All others are defiled by sin. They are unclean dwelling places for the Spirit of God. He doesn't enter them. But Jesus is a holy temple for God's Spirit. The Spirit enters him and stays.

And then comes the voice from heaven. “You are my beloved Son”. Now, we’ve heard that before. Through Moses and the prophets God spoke these words over Israel many times throughout its history. Israel was God’s firstborn, his beloved son, the apple of his eye. And now the words are spoken over Jesus. The difference is the added evaluation “with you I am well pleased.” God never said that of his ancient people. How could he? They were to him one disappointment after another.

We’re reminded of that in what happens next. The Spirit casts Jesus into the wilderness. It is, in a way, a reenactment of what happened to Israel in the days of Moses. After being delivered from their slavery in Egypt – by the death of the firstborn, no less – they had their baptism in the Red Sea. They passed through the water and were led by the Spirit into the desert. There they faced a series of tests. In each one the Lord was telling them, “You’ve seen time and again to what great lengths I have gone to rescue you. You’ve seen my mighty power displayed in the Ten Plagues. You’ve seen me open up the Red Sea for you to cross over on dry ground, and you saw me drop the walls of water on the Egyptian army that was pursuing you. I’ve told you time and again that I’m going to take you safely to the land I promised to your forefathers. Will you now trust me to do it?”

So the first test comes. A few days out from crossing the Red Sea the water supply is dangerously low. They come upon an oasis where there’s a spring and a pool of water. They come running up to it thrilled and excited only to discover the water is brackish and unfit to drink. Immediately it begins. The people complain that the Lord hates them. He only brought us here to die of thirst. What a cruel and sadistic God he is. He never had any intention of taking us to Canaan. No, it was his plan to bring us here and kill us. Oh, why did we ever leave good ol’ Egypt? It was an epic fail of the trust test.

By miraculous means the Lord cleanses the water and makes it sweet and drinkable. “See? I’m taking care of you. You can trust me. Will you?” Then comes test two: the food supply runs out. You know the story: as hunger begins to gnaw on them a bit the Israelites start singing their familiar refrain of gloom and doom. It’s another epic fail of the trust test. God responds by giving them manna from heaven and meat in the form of quail. All they want. Every day. Never failing. “Will you trust me now?”

Over and over again they fail similar tests. They prove that no matter what the Lord does for them, at the slightest hint of discomfort or adversity they give up all hope in God. It culminates when the Lord leads them up to the edge of the Promised Land. For forty days Israel camps just outside while they send 12 spies to reconnoiter the land. The spies report back. Initially they say the land is terrific; truly flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord said. They even bring back physical evidence of the land’s fruitfulness. But then some of the spies get cold feet. They say the land is full of powerful enemies who live in impregnable fortresses. Oh, and they’re giants. And they outnumber us ... by millions. We can’t hope to defeat them. And did we forget to mention the land is the worst place to live ever? The soil is like concrete. We can’t possibly hope to farm it. There’s only cactus and scrub brush. It’s a land that devours those who try to live in it.

Cue the music. Israel starts singing the God hates us song again. And the Lord finally says, “I’ve had it with you. You’ve been sitting here for forty days whining and bellyaching about everything I’ve done for you. Fine. You don’t trust me to give you the land like I said I would; fight all your battles for you? You don’t want to go into the land? Okay. You don’t get to. Stay

here in the desert. Forty years. One year for each day that you refused to trust me to do all that I promised.

The thing to see is that now, having been baptized, Jesus is to face the same kind of testing. For forty days he's in the desert deprived of food while Satan throws everything he's got at him. We know from the other Gospels that he tells Jesus to doubt his divine mission and his Father's care. He suggests the Jesus take short cuts; do it the easy way. Do it my way, Satan tells him. No pain. No suffering. Worship me and I'll give you the whole shebang.

But despite Satan's best efforts to get him to doubt or to give in; despite the threat of wild animals: lions, wolves, deadly desert vipers; despite his hunger and thirst, his sunburned skin and sand scorched feet, Jesus refuses to buckle. His faith under trial remains steadfast. He passes all the tests. He passes them for us. And true to his word, his Father takes care of him. He sends holy angels to minister to him.

And having passed the test of faith, Jesus goes on the offense. He crosses the Jordan and begins his conquest of the Promised Land. And look where he goes first. Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, has just thrown John into prison for preaching against his sin of adultery with his brother's wife. One might logically conclude that it's dangerous for preachers of the truth to go to Galilee. So that's where Jesus begins. The point is that he has no fear of the enemy. He knows that through him his heavenly Father will accomplish everything he's promised.

And that is precisely what he begins to proclaim: "The time is fulfilled." That is to say, "It's happening now as I speak." "The kingdom of God is at hand." And that's an unfortunately weak translation. A better rendering would be "The kingdom of God is *here* – it's present right now." And that's correct. Where is the kingdom? It's where the King is. And Jesus is the King. And how does one become a part of his kingdom? By hearing and following what Jesus says: "Repent and believe the Gospel." That is, repent of your sin and unbelief – your refusal to trust the Word and Promises of God – and believe the Good News: the Good News that God does it all for you. You can trust him. He works salvation for you. He forgives your sin. He grants you life eternal—in *his kingdom*. When? Now. As he speaks.

In fact, it's his speaking that makes it happen. And this is where we in our day have a definite advantage over Old Testament Israel. Recall that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism because there was no other person on earth fit for him in whom to dwell. But that changed. When on the cross Jesus suffered and died for the sins of the world, the veil of sin that separates people from God was torn away. We see this already on the evening of Christ's resurrection. Jesus appears to his terrified disciples, announces God's peace and forgiveness, and breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Having been declared forgiven and cleansed of sin for Christ's sake, they are now fit to be the dwelling place of God's Spirit. The Spirit takes up residence in them. And in them, he empowers them to do what they cannot do by their own reason or strength. What's that? What they couldn't do before: repent and believe the Gospel. Not only does God through Jesus do everything for their salvation, he also by his Spirit gives them the faith to trust in that salvation. When? Right then. As he spoke.

And as he spoke to you. When? When you were baptized. Then the powerful Word of Jesus was spoken, your sins were washed away, you received the Holy Spirit, and the Father received you as his beloved child, a child with whom he is well pleased for Christ's sake. And the Spirit within you grabbed hold of those words of approval. He grabbed hold of God's promises. And he caused you to do what Old Testament Israel always failed to do: believe them.

And then he, the Holy Spirit, drove you into the wilderness to face testing. The moment the Spirit came upon you working faith in Jesus in your heart, the war was on. It was like the Spirit painted a target on you. You became the enemy of Satan. He put his sights on you. You moved from his kingdom to Christ's. And he wants you back. He wants you to lose. He wants you to doubt God's Word, despair of God's love and care, and turn back to the bondage of sin. When? Right now. Every moment of every day.

You know, soldiers in time of war find it frustrating that they spend most of their time waiting. War is largely posturing, prepping, marching here or there, preparing defenses that may or may not be used, and all kinds of other stuff; but very little time is actually spent fighting. The battles themselves are comparatively brief. Soldiers spend far more time nervously waiting for the battle to begin.

And too often we live our Christian lives like that. We think of Satan's attacks as something that happen once in a while: a temptation to commit this sin or that. That isn't the way it is. For the Christian, the battle is always on. The time of your testing is right now. Every moment, the enemy is applying pressure.

And that's why today's Gospel lesson is a good place for us to begin the season of Lent. It's a reminder for us that because we belong to Christ, we are at war with Satan. But this is a war we can win. We can win it because Christ won it for us. We can win it because Jesus has given us his Holy Spirit. We can win it because by Christ's Word and the power of his Spirit, our faith is being strengthened and made secure. We win as often as we hear and follow the words of Jesus: "Repent and believe the Good News." When? The time is now. It's always time to repent and believe the Good News. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!