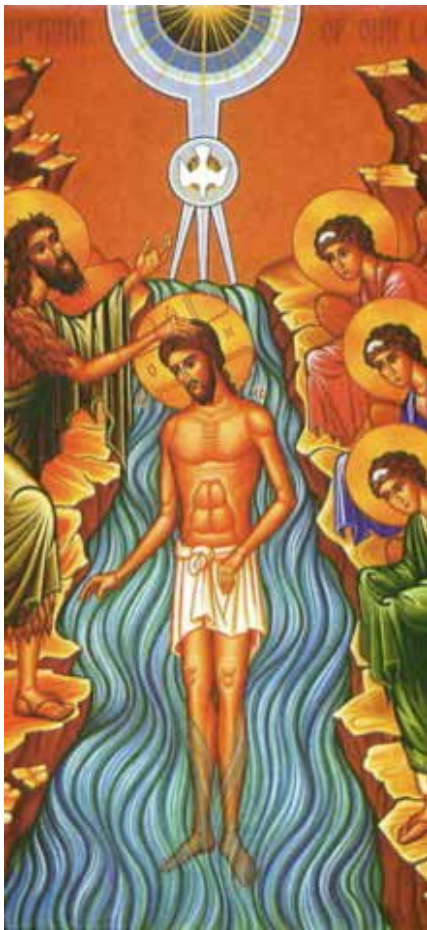


Study 1 - Through Water and Wilderness

“The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe!”



Opening Up.....

- 1 Have you ever walked in or been taken to desert or wilderness/remote regions of the world? What would you say were the things that struck you most about that experience?
- 2 There's water in the first verse of Genesis and plenty in the time of Adam & Eve, Noah and Jonah to name just a few. The people of Israel passed through water on their way to the Promised Land, Jesus enters a river to be baptized and in the last chapter of Revelation we have a river of life flowing through the Holy City.

Other religions consider rivers as sacred. Are we guilty of taking water for granted where it is in plentiful supply?

Our Reading Mark 1:9-15

(and if time allows Genesis 9:8-17 and 1 Peter 3:8-22)

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Quotable Quotes

“Lent comes providentially to reawaken us, to shake us from our lethargy.” (Pope Francis)

“Nothing, how little so ever it be, if it is suffered for God's sake, can pass without merit in the sight of God.”
(Thomas a Kempis)

Going through water

Mark simply tells us that at a point in time Jesus made his way from Nazareth to be baptized by his cousin John the Baptist in the River Jordan. But why on earth would Jesus need to be baptized?

We're not told by Mark, but the suggestion is that with the appearance of John in the desert calling the people to repentance, Jesus realized his hour had come and this was the moment to unveil his own public ministry, and it is a moment full of imagery.

This is Jesus connecting both with the people who are responding to John's call and also with his heavenly Father - one hand held out to the people gathered around and the other lifted upward toward God, who speaks directly to Jesus.

If you want some more imagery connected with God plan of salvation, think about the famous story of the people of Israel being led by Moses across the Red Sea on dry land (Exodus 14:21-22), and perhaps the lesser known one where Moses' successor Joshua leads the people and the ark of the covenant across the River Jordan into the Promised Land...

Walking in wild places

Once again it seems that there is a connection between the Old and New Testament stories of God's relationship with his people, and it's the wilderness experience.

The periods of time involved, 40 years and 40 days, are considered to be more indicators of time passing than precise periods, but any wilderness experience can be both a lonely and testing time. It can also be a time of spiritual strengthening, as many who have set time aside for a retreat will testify.

and the water dries up to allow them to cross (Joshua 3:15-17).

Jesus going through the water of repentance speaks of his role in the salvation of these and all people, leading them by example into God's kingdom and inviting them to follow.

And just in case the people were expecting a warlord Messiah to lead them against the Roman authorities, there's a hint which they seem to have missed. The Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus in the form of a dove - a symbol of gentleness.

We know from Matthew's story (in chapter 3) that John the Baptist's message was less than comfortable, with talk of God's winnowing fork and a threshing floor!

In contrast, Jesus' emphasis was on the "good news" that here among them was the One they were looking for, not wielding a sword but love - and welcoming believers who will walk through the same water that he has entered into God's kingdom.

John the Baptist was in a wilderness place (fulfilling prophecy) when he began preparing the way for Jesus. It was in the wilderness that Jesus met him, and soon afterward he was led into a further period alone before beginning to share his own message.

The Hebrew word for wilderness has its root in Genesis and the state of the universe before God brought order from chaos - formless, shapeless and dangerous - and maybe it was important for Jesus to begin here, in an empty, desolate

and possibly dangerous place. Time to be alone with his heavenly Father, time to contemplate the journey he was going to have to make, time to be sure in his own mind that there was no turning back.

Interestingly this is the point that many people get to in their own lives before they can grasp the hand of God held out to them.

A time of testing

Temptation is one of the great uniting features of all human beings. Temptations, which come in all shapes and sizes are often to do with satisfying selfish desires.

We're told by the gospel writers that during Jesus' retreat in the wilderness he was tempted by Satan. Mark leaves it at that, but Matthew (chapter 4) fills in the detail, and they are the temptations that maybe we would expect Jesus to be confronted with before he brought his message to the world - to abuse his power and claim his kingship via miraculous acts rather than the path that he knew was his alone.

John the Baptist was the one who prepared the road that would lead the people back to their God, and the road began in the wilderness. The gospel

writers tell us quite simply, and visually, that Jesus could not be the Messiah that he was without first walking where we all at times tread.

It is only the one who has experienced tragedy first-hand who can truly empathize with others who have been through the same experience. So it was that Jesus prepared himself before even beginning his short time of ministry.

The message of Jesus was very similar to that of John the Baptist, about the need for repentance, a turning around, and the closeness of God's kingdom both in space and time represented by Jesus himself.

The call is to believe!

Talking points

- 1 Baptism, and the symbolism of water (either sprinkled or by immersion) has been at the heart of Christianity since the beginning of the church. Has the church got the balance right between baptism being seen as a welcome, and a call to repentance?
- 2 In the passage from 1 Peter, the writer links the water of baptism with a change of behavior, an eagerness "to do good" even when provoked, following the example of Jesus. Within our own society where it is often infants from outside the fellowship who are baptized, what is the role of the church in encouraging such behavior?

- 3 Peter tells his readers to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” It’s about being prepared to give our testimony, but how do we share our Christian lives and hopes so they make sense to someone else?
- 4 Is there a positive side to the many temptations we face in life?
- 5 Do you have a personal wilderness story that you could share?
- 6 Mark’s use of the phrase “heaven being torn open,” can be a visual picture of those moments when we experience the closeness of God in our own lives, rather like an invisible curtain being drawn aside. Do we leave space in our lives for this to happen, and if not what could we do this Lent?
- 7 What is your understanding of Jesus’ words, “The kingdom of God is near”?
- 8 The water of the Jordan River and baptism are symbolic of cleansing. Are symbols important to your spiritual life, and if so which do you find helpful?
- 9 Jesus was sure that this was his time. Many pray for something to happen “Now!” and complain when it doesn’t. How easy is it to understand that now might not be the right time, rather than simply assume that the prayer we uttered was useless?
- 10 Jesus’ life was Spirit-led from the beginning, even when it meant a time of testing. How aware are we of the Spirit’s prompting in our own lives? If the answer is negative, what could we do this Lent to maybe improve the situation?

SAMPLE.....SAMPLE.....