The Word of the Lord from Mark 1:12-13: “The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Genesis and Exodus

Of the four Gospels, Mark is the one who keeps things brief. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is a prime example. It’s the traditional Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent. In Luke, you get eleven verses; and in Matthew, you get thirteen. In Mark, you get two. Mark’s account of the temptation of Jesus is so short that, to make it worth you standing up for the Gospel lesson, the reading includes three different big events in Jesus’ life: His baptism—the beginning of His public ministry, His temptation in the wilderness and then His preaching about the kingdom of God. Mark covers all that in six verses, boom-boom-boom: baptism, temptation, kingdom. Rather than go into detail about each event, it’s as if Mark is saying, “Look at the sequence! Baptism—temptation—kingdom! The progression is important!” It is.

Baptism, temptation, kingdom. There are big doings going on in this text. It’s part of a much bigger story. It’s all about Jesus at work to save you, because it’s all about Jesus doing what everybody—including you—has failed to do.

So, for instance, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness to undo the damage Adam did.

Think back to Adam and Eve. They’re created by God in a perfect world. In this world, God also creates for them a special place to call home: the garden of Eden. It’s not just that it’s lush and fertile and full of fruit trees for food; it’s the place for them to call home because that’s where God desires them to be, where He promises to walk with them and care for them. There, they have food and security and authority from God over all creation.

You know what happens next: Satan shows up in the form of a serpent and tempts Eve, while Adam stands there like a big galoot and doesn’t stop it from happening. Satan starts out the temptation with a key question: “Did God really say?” From there, he twists God’s Word and tells them it’s best if they do what God said not to do: eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve opt for his lies over God’s truth. They eat from the tree. They bring sin and death into the world.

Along with the consequences of sin and death, pain and sorrow, God also kicks them out of the garden. What’s outside the garden after the fall? Not garden: I think we can safely call it wilderness. Adam and Eve are driven out into a world of thorns and thistles, animals turned hostile and dust and death, because they defied the Lord. But they’re not without hope: before God sends them out, He promises them that He will send the Savior, the Seed of the woman. He will be at enmity with Satan: they will strive against each other, and the Savior will crush the devil’s head. In the fullness of time, His kingdom will come.

That’s the sequence of Adam and Eve: they have a beginning—not baptism, but creation. They have a wilderness, because they’re kicked out of the garden. They wait for a better kingdom, trusting in the One who will come and defeat the devil.
Jesus arrives in our Gospel lesson. His baptism is the beginning of His public ministry. Immediately after He's baptized, the Holy Spirit drives Him into the wilderness to do what Adam didn’t. Adam had food in the garden: Jesus has none in the wilderness. Adam had animals free from fear: Jesus gets wild beasts. Adam had every good gift of God: Jesus has nothing; and while He has nothing, the devil tempts Him. He tempts Him with food, with safety and with authority: he tempts Him with everything that Adam and Eve had in abundance and threw away when they gave into temptation. He tells Jesus that He can skip hunger and suffering and death—that sort of stuff is for Adams and Eves, not for the Son of God.

Actually, the devil has a point: why should the holy Son of God be hungry or suffer or die because of what sinful man has done? Because that’s what Jesus has come to do. That’s what His baptism began, remember? He was created to live, but brought death into the world; so Jesus was baptized to die, that He might bring life to all who believe. Adam had everything in the garden and threw it all away for the wilderness, so Jesus goes into the wilderness with nothing to restore all things. Adam brought death into the world because he didn’t resist the devil’s temptation, so Jesus restored life by resisting Satan in the wilderness. After Adam failed to resist temptation, all he could tell his descendants was that they would die because of his sin; but because Jesus resisted temptation, what happened next? He went to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand, because He was God and King and at hand to defeat the devil.

The temptation of Jesus is all about His work of undoing what happened when Adam was tempted, by doing what Adam didn’t do.

It isn’t just for Adam. It’s for Israel, too.

Think of Exodus. The Israelites are slaves in Egypt with no hope of rescue until the Lord sends Moses. Moses leads them out of Egypt to the Red Sea, with Pharaoh in hot pursuit to kill. But the Lord saves His people: He parts the Red Sea, creates a path through the waters, and the Israelites cross on dry ground. When Pharaoh tries to pursue them, God collapses the walls of water and the armies of Egypt are drowned.

The Red Sea crossing is a big thing. It’s both a miraculous deliverance and a declaration that the Israelites are free. They’re no longer slaves to the Egyptians: their enemies are drowned and they are delivered to be God’s people. If you think about it, it’s no wonder that St. Paul calls the Red Sea the baptism of the people of Israel (1 Corinthians 10:2).

What do they cross the Red Sea into—what’s next? The wilderness. They’re on their way to the Promised Land, but they aren’t there yet. They spend forty years in the wilderness; and despite God’s ongoing care, they grumble against Him continually. They complain about food and worry they are going to starve to death. They accuse God of bringing them into the wilderness to die. They voice no confidence in God or Moses, desiring different gods like a golden calf, or a different leader. In other words, the devil afflicts them with temptations about food, safety and authority; and the Israelites do a fantastic job of failing for those temptations and sinning over and over again. They continually prove how much they don’t deserve to be God’s people, but God keeps them anyway. Why? Because He has promises to keep. He’s promised He’ll deliver them to the Promised Land. He’s promised that, through them, the Savior will come into the world. Eventually, after their Red Sea baptism and their time of temptation in the wilderness, He delivers them to the Promised Land—to their own kingdom. It isn’t because they’ve been faithful
to Him, but because He is faithful to them. More specifically, He’s done this because the Savior will come, take their place, and redeem them.

Israel then has its own sequence of baptism, temptation and kingdom. In the fullness of time, the Savior is born. At the right time, He is baptized. As by the Red Sea the Lord once declared Israel to be His people, He declares of Jesus at the Jordan, “This is My beloved Son.” Then Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days, one for each year of the Israelites’ time in the wilderness. He has no manna or food of any kind, he’s constantly tempted by the devil, and yet remains without sin. He does what Israel couldn’t do. When He took the place of sinners at His baptism, He even took the place of sinful Israelites who lived centuries before. By His temptations, Jesus effectively says to His Father, “When You look upon Israel’s time in the wilderness, don’t look upon what they did. I’m taking their place, so look at what I do. Instead of casting them out for their disobedience, keep them because I obey as they should have.” God the Father agrees, although there is more to the plan: He will not hold the sins of His people against them because Jesus substitutes His life for theirs and because He will go and substitute His death for theirs.

Do you see the big picture of the temptation of Jesus? It’s not just a short campaign of Savior v. Satan. It involves all of history. It’s the Son of God taking the place of sinners, doing what they couldn’t do—resist temptation and remain holy so that He might give them credit for His life...and credit for His death. He does it for Adam. He does it for Israel.

And then there’s you.

**II. And Then There’s You**

You have a beginning among the people of God. You were baptized. At creation, Adam was perfect and holy before God; in baptism, you are a new creation in Christ. Because He died and rose for you, you’re a citizen in the kingdom of God. You’re an heir of the kingdom of heaven.

You haven’t reached that Promised Land yet. You’re still in the wilderness of this dying world. What happens to you in the wilderness? Temptation. You’re under constant attack by the devil because baptism has marked you as one of God’s children, and the devil is hard at work to get you to abandon God’s Word. Every day, Satan is working on you with the whisper, “Did God really say?” He casts doubt on God’s law, as in, “Did God really say that you have to keep these commands to be holy? A lot of people are breaking them, and they seem to be doing just fine.” He casts doubt on God’s gospel, as in, “Did God really say that Jesus died for all of your sins? Even that one—the one that you can’t forgive yourself for?”

And how do you do with all of those temptations? Not well, and it’s all the sadder because you’re likely dealing with temptations in prosperity, not adversity. In other words, you’re probably not tempted to doubt God because you have no food, but you’re tempted to be upset with Him about the state of your health and body from eating too much. You’re probably not tempted to covet because you have nothing, but because you don’t have more than you have. You’re not tempted to wonder of God’s faithfulness because it’s tough to attend church without being beheaded, but you’re tempted to get a little annoyed at the inconvenience that God commands worship once every single week. You’re probably so used to temptations of gossip and coveting and lust that you’re not resisting them, but rather you’re working to keep them in contented moderation. You’ve also figured out along the way that temptations aren’t nearly so tormenting if you just go ahead and give into them right away. Saves times and effort that way.

There you are, undeserving of God’s help, pretty comfortable and secure with the sins that have become helpful, pretty awful at resisting temptation even when you’re trying.
So there’s Jesus, forty days in the wilderness with nothing, tested and tempted by the devil every step of the way. He’s not just there for Adam and the Israelites. He’s there for you. Don’t pass by that scene too fast. Examine yourself. Identify the temptations and your sins. Hold up your record for the past week against the Son of God in the wilderness.

You’re baptized, for crying out loud. You’re set free from sin. You have no excuse. Your self-examination should leave you pretty ashamed.

But Jesus in the wilderness should not. He’s not there to shame you. He’s there to save you. For your sin, for your life of ongoing surrender to temptation in the wilderness of this world, you deserve God’s wrath. But remember that Jesus was baptized to take the place of sinners. He was baptized to take your place. He was baptized for death so that you might be baptized for life.

As He was baptized for you, He was tempted for you. In the wilderness, He’s resisting every temptation because you don’t. But Jesus intercedes for you. He says to His Father, “When You look upon them, remember that I took their place. When You look at their lives, look at My life and see Me resisting every temptation, and give them the credit for it. When You see that they deserve death for their sin, look at My cross and know that I have already died in their place. I’ve undone what Adam did and I have done what Israel could not do. I’ve lived perfectly for them, too. For the sake of My life and My death, Father, forgive them for their sins.”

And for the sake of Jesus, His life and His death, God forgives you.

That’s what the temptation is all about. Jesus resists all temptation and remains holy so that He might save you, who gives into temptation and are unholy without Him.

A warning before we wrap this up: if this news moves you to say you can give into any temptation all the more because Jesus has resisted every temptation, then you don’t get it. You’ve fallen for the temptation to cheapen His grace, and you’re destroying your faith.

The Christian faith instead marvels that the holy Son of God would submit to such treatment and temptation in the wilderness on behalf of sinners like, well, like you. By such faith, you resist temptation and you quickly repent when you fail: not out of coercion but out of gratitude for His great sacrifice and His ongoing love. By baptism, He has made you a new creation, joining you to Himself and clothing you in His righteousness. Now in this wilderness, He protects you from danger, gives you strength against temptation and by His grace preserves your faith despite your sin. He does so because the kingdom of God is near. This wilderness is not your home: the Promised Land of eternal life in heaven is. This is true, and only true, because Jesus has lived and been tempted and has died and risen for you. For His sake alone, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen