

Out of the River, Into the Arena

Meta

Date: February 18, 2024

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Genesis 9:8–17

Psalm 25 or 25:3–9

I Peter 3:18–22

Mark 1:9–13

Opening

Out of the river and into the arena. That's St. Mark's account of Jesus' first appearance in public life. Jesus rises from his baptism in the Jordan River, the dove descends, a sign of Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit, and that same Spirit sends him to the wilderness.

Where St. Matthew gives a full narrative of Jesus' temptation in the desert, St. Mark writes three sentences. Matthew records the threefold temptation of Jesus and each exchange he endured with the devil therein. Mark doesn't record the specifics of Jesus' temptation, not the content, not the number. But he does make sure that we hear, dear reader, that wild animals were there. And angels came to the aid of our Lord there, too. The wilderness is not just a desert in Mark's view, it's a battleground. Wild animals, 'the beasts', as another translation has it, gives the sense that Jesus stands in a spiritual colosseum for 40 days. The desert became the arena of unseen warfare.

Jesus in the Water, Jesus in the Arena

The suddenness and the force by which the Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness makes one wonder, 'Why did the Holy Spirit bring these two moments together?' Remember: the same Holy Spirit that anointed Jesus with power in the river drove him into the wilderness with Satan and his demons.

The best answer to this question comes from St. John, who wrote in his first epistle, 'The reason the Son of God **appeared** was to destroy the works of the devil.'¹ Jesus' first public appearance was a revelation of his true identity. After he was baptized, the Father spoke from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.' The Spirit then descended and anointed Jesus with power. That was Jesus' appearing. And after his appearing, the Spirit drives him to the desert arena to fulfill the will of God—to destroy the works of the devil.

¹ 1John 3.8

Christ did not first confront the works of the devil when he entered the wilderness; he began his destruction of the devil's works when he entered the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. Christ did not need baptism for the cleansing of sin; his humility and obedience to the Father led him there. Jesus received baptism from John to transform water into a sacrament of new creation. Where water had been the sign of death and chaos for ages, Christ transformed water from a tomb to become the womb of eternal life, as the church fathers have said.

When the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for this face off with Satan, our Lord does resist. And with obedience and humility, Jesus followed the Spirit's guidance again, even when that meant walking into the arena of temptation and deprivation. Though Jesus did not need baptism for cleansing, his anointing in baptism arms him for the battle that awaits. Each time Satan questions Jesus' identity, 'If you are the Son of God...' Jesus need only abide in the word of his Father, spoken at his baptism, 'You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' When Satan tempts Jesus to use power to save himself, by turning stones to bread, Jesus defeats Satan through **humility**. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, yet he feasted on the Word of God.

There is a beloved saying in the church that says, 'always choose the way of humility because that is the one path where the devil will not follow you.' That is how our Lord defeats his Enemy—Jesus doesn't resort to worldly power, he renounces the glory and honor of this world. *Christ defeats the Enemy of God through humility and obedience to the Father.*

And that actually connects to an ancient truth about our Enemy: remember that Satan is a fallen angel. The other name by which he is known, Lucifer, means 'bringer of light.' Before his great rebellion and fall, Satan was one of the most beautiful of angels. After his fall, he cannot regain his former glory because he cannot repent. *For those who have fallen into sin, their glory will be their repentance.* But Satan cannot repent. So he appears with light to deceive and trap us.

Satan also tempts us because he is consumed with envy. He is envious of the eternal weight of glory promised to the saints. So he harasses and attacks those who *can* repent and who struggle to walk the way of repentance. Our Enemy comes as an angel of light, appealing to our desires, offering solutions and an end to our suffering. He presents solutions to us so that we won't choose repentance, which brings real salvation.

And that brings us to an important insight about the unseen realm. We know from Scripture that Satan prowls around like a lion. So often he prowls around the vicinity of holy things. Remember Mark's Gospel—Satan is present in the wilderness nearby right after Christ rises from the water. Satan seeks to disrupt and undo holy things. He especially despises the sacraments of the church because sacraments bring the grace of God, grace that releases you from the stronghold of the Enemy. Whenever people prepare for sacraments like baptism or confirmation or marriage, I frequently say, 'Prepare yourself for the enemy's opposition. Seek refuge in prayer and do not be surprised at disruptions, tangible and intangible.' Satan prowls around the vicinity of holy things because where sacraments are given, the devil's strongholds fall.

The Weapon of Baptism

So take heart and place your courage in the mighty grace of God. How do we resist the Enemy? Fight with your baptism. Our baptism is not only a sacrament of God's grace, it is a weapon for unseen warfare against the Enemy of God. Our church fathers fully embraced their baptism as means of spiritual combat. St. Ignatius of Antioch said to his churches:

Keep your baptism as weaponry, your faith as a helmet, your love as a spear, your patient endurance as a full set of armor.²

The Christian who leaves his baptism behind is like a soldier who abandons his weapons and goes AWOL in time of combat.

When we were baptized, we were anointed with the sign of the cross, the seal of the Holy Spirit. This, too, is our weapon in spiritual combat against the world, the flesh, and the devil. It's fitting that on this day when we enroll candidates for confirmation, we hear the instructions from St. John Chrysostom, addressed to catechumens in the 5th century:

The enemy is furious, grinds his teeth, and goes about like a roaring lion when he sees those who were formerly subject to his sovereignty in sudden rebellion against him, not only renouncing him, but going over to the side of Christ. Therefore, the priest anoints you on the forehead and puts on you the sign of the cross, in order that the enemy may turn away his eyes. For he does not dare to look you in the face when he sees the lightning flash which leaps forth from it and blinds his eyes. Henceforth, from that day there is strife and counterstrife with him, and on this account the priest leads you into the spiritual arena as athletes of Christ by virtue of this anointing.³

Sign on the Cross

The sign of the cross is not only a gesture of reverence we make in worship; it is a means of defense at all times against all assaults of the Enemy. When the Enemy harasses me, accuses me, or attacks me, he's hoping I'll try to match wits with him. The mind is his preferred battlefield because the fallen mind tries to fight in its own strength. But if I do not place my hope in my mind; if I confess my weakness, my helplessness and turn to Christ, then Satan cannot take me captive. That is why I commend wordless prayer, the Sign of the Cross, when the Enemy tempts and attacks you. Make the sign of the cross, make it over your mind, over your heart, fully trusting in Jesus, who is mighty to save. It is no superstition, it is a prayer that says, 'I cannot save myself. I'm not strong enough. But Christ will save me by the word of his cross.'

If you are in public, Jesus taught us to not make a show of our righteousness. Well, then, make the sign of the cross with your thumb over your forehead. That's what ancient Christians did in times of persecution, to acknowledge one another in public. Fight with your baptism; make the sign of the cross so that you trust in the strength of Christ, not your reasoning.

Unseen Warfare, Unseen Protection

There is one final way we fight the Enemy with our baptism. St. Mark tells us that in Jesus' temptation, angels came and ministered to him. Where the saints of God endure unseen warfare, they will have unseen protection, too.

² *The Letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch, VII: To Polycarp*

³ *St. John Chrysostom, St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, trans. Paul W. Harkins, vol. 31, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1963), 51–52.*

So where is the one place where we are assured that angels minister to us? Church. The Table of the Lord. Every week we worship in the presence of angels at the Lord's Table. We adore the Lord with them...

Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name

Angels and Archangels are here to defend you. The saints of God are here to surround you, encourage you, and pray for you. We have protection here, seen and unseen. When you are enduring a season of temptation or attack in the arena, eat here. Drink here. Kneel here. Your baptism gives you access to the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Your baptism and the Holy Eucharist are the best defenses you have against the Enemy of God. You have been marked with the cross of Christ. So boast in nothing but the cross, for by the sign of the cross we have been saved, we are being saved, and we *will* be saved; for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.