The last words we heard from our passage last week were, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And the words that follow immediately after that claim and that start our pericope this morning are, “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness...” You are claimed and - now - you are sent. Makes baptism a little more risky, doesn’t it? Imagine if we said to our sweet little children, all dressed in white, their heads dripping wet, “Go on now, live a life worthy of your baptism. Just go on there, to the wilderness. You’ve got what you need.”

Jesus knew what being God’s beloved meant, what the wilderness meant. When Jesus heard “This is my Son,” perhaps he heard the subtext pounding loudly beside, “This is who I send,” because that’s how the story goes, doesn’t it? When God called the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, God sent them to the wilderness. “You are chosen as my people and now, you are given this space - this harsh, demanding space - and this time - this forty years time - to figure out what it means to be my people.” So for forty years, Israel wandered the desert working out what it meant to be God’s own beloved. There were glorious moments of faithfulness and of doubt, of infighting and of stumbling through how and who to worship. There were boundaries to make and push against and learn the beauty of and there was some shouting, too. Turns out, it takes time and a whole lot of grace and hope and honesty when you’re trying to be God’s beloved. Turns out, though, that you make it to the promised land, too.

Remember for Matthew’s Gospel, connecting Israel’s story with Jesus’ own was how Matthew was able to proclaim the Messianic promise of Christ. It wasn’t forty years in Matthew but forty days, a purposeful parallel, where the Incarnate God in Jesus Christ singularly shows us how to traverse the wilderness. See - I chose this One and now I sent this One. Pay attention, God seems to say. Pay attention because I am calling you, too, children of God, and I will send you out. That “child of God” name and claim feels a little more itchy on your skin now, doesn’t it?

When I was in youth ministry, I often would call after teenagers “Remember your baptism!” as a sideways preacher joke to remind them to act right no matter where they went. But the truth is, I meant it and so I said it a lot because I wanted them to make the connection that with baptism comes new life and new life means wilderness. There was no separating those waters from the wild life that followed. The story doesn’t stop when the waters dry but instead flows into what’s next. And if they’d been listening carefully, they’d know that what comes next in this life of faith was going to bring them trouble. Because that’s how the story goes, doesn’t it?
Following Jesus means leaving everything - your boat, your family, your livelihood - behind. (4:22)

Following Jesus means reconciling with your brother or sister before giving a gift at the altar and coming to terms quickly with your accuser. (5:24)

Following Jesus means cutting off your right eye or your right hand if it causes you to sin. (5:29-30)

Following Jesus means giving to everyone who begs from you, and not refusing anyone who wants to borrow from you. (5:42)

Following Jesus means loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. (5:44)

And that’s just what he says in the chapter that follows the wilderness! There are 23 more chapters that call for even more trouble than this.

So we start our discipleship here, water still dripping and wondering what the wilderness can teach us and looking to Jesus to show us the way. With each temptation the devil presents, Jesus teaches us how we might traverse it all:

The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written - ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” I understand what it means to be human flesh, my disciples, pay attention. You are not alone.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” God’s faithfulness is from everlasting to everlasting, my disciples, pay attention. You are not alone.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Worship God and you will have all you need, my disciples, pay attention. You are not alone.

The claim is there - we know it - and so, too, is the temptation - we know it. This story reminds us of the both/and. We are both beloved and tempted and so it is. Being beloved is hard work. It demands our whole lives. There’s Good News in remembering that Jesus knew that, too. We can’t get to his preaching, his proclamation without stopping at this story first. We can’t get to a life lived fully in
God, a life of discipleship without first wrestling with all the things that will try to stop or hold us back or mar our relationship with the holy because something will. We will wonder if Jesus really understands what it means to be human and loves me this I know because depression descends and bodies are fragile and the life everlasting seems too good to be true. We will doubt that God is ever faithful when systematic oppression rolls on with the force of a thousand tankers or when children starve in a nation resplendent with resources. We will find ways to fill our days with anything but worship and praise because to be God’s beloved is so much - so much grace, so much of a call, so much of a demand - that we will try and fill it and find that we can’t. That’s how the story goes. That’s how being human goes.

But this is also how the story goes:

God created us to be in relationship with God - 

*Let us create humankind in our image...and God saw everything that God had made and indeed, it was very good.* (Genesis 1:26, 31)

God sent Jesus - 

*and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen God’s glory, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14)

And Jesus promised we would never be alone - 

*The Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will remind you of all that I have said to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.* (John 14:26)

Could it be that we have to stop here - in this wilderness - to acknowledge that “we are not complete in and of ourselves, that lack is a permanent part of our condition? To be human, in other words, is to be aware that we carry inside ourselves a hole, an emptiness that we will always be restless to fill.”

The mathematician “Blaise Pascal once described this essential condition of humanity as having a ‘God-shaped hole,’ and this is what Jesus demonstrates [in our story and indeed, in his whole life]. There is no filling of that gap, no permanently erasing that hole, except in and through our relationship with God.

Yet that, also, isn’t quite the full picture. To be Christian is not to have that hole, that need, that awareness of finitude erased once and for all...to be human is to accept that we are, finally, created for relationship with God and with each other.”

Created to live as God’s beloved - called and sent into the wilderness, the troublesome and beautifully terrifying wilderness - called and never alone. That’s how the story goes. That’s how our story goes. May it be so in our doing because it most certainly so with God. Amen.

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2 Lose.