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Lent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Our Scapegoat”

Text: Mark 1:12-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

On the first Sunday in Lent, it is customary for the Church to consider the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. This year, we heard that account from Mark’s Gospel, and it is, you have to admit, remarkably short. Only two verses. Just the facts. None of the details, like Matthew and Luke give us. Those two Gospels tell us what three of the great temptations Jesus faced were and how Jesus defeated Satan with the Word of God. But Mark includes none of that, which, I suggest to you, is significant. Because it helps us understand exactly what Mark is telling us here, for while he does not include *those* details that Matthew and Luke did, he does mention some things that the others do not. And it is those unique details that we need to examine today to determine exactly what it is that Mark is trying to tell us, and how that is of benefit to us as we journey through this season of Lent, and as we journey through our lives.

And so Mark begins: ***“The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.”***

Now that is an interesting statement. Jesus had just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, and the voice from Heaven sounded out, ***“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*** And then ***“The Spirit immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness.”*** And I ask: is that how you treat someone with whom you are well-pleased? By driving them out into the wilderness? Why would God do that to His beloved Son – the God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God? . . . Matthew and Luke tell us simply that Jesus was “led” by the Spirit. A much kinder and gentler God it seems. But not Mark. Jesus is driven. Actually, the original Greek word used there is that He was “thrown out” into the wilderness. For Mark, there was nothing kind or gentle about it.

But there’s something else unique along with that that Mark tells us. He includes the seemingly insignificant detail that ***“[Jesus] was with the wild animals.”*** Now, I guess we could have assumed that, since Jesus was out in the wilderness. But Mark tells us explicitly. Using a full 20% of the words he uses in his whole description to tell us this

little detail. So it must be important. And actually, if we put these two unique statements of Mark together, we get the impression that Jesus was here being “*thrown to the wolves.*” Thrown out, into the wilderness, with the wild animals. The wildest of them all being the serpent, Satan himself, as Satan has at Jesus for 40 days, tempting him, trying to create doubt.

And so it seems as if the tempting of Jesus is simply one part of a bigger picture that Mark is painting for us here. And that with his words, Mark wants us to here see Jesus not only as the one who resists temptation and is therefore sinless, but also as fulfilling an Old Testament role which his words seem to suggest – the role of the **scapegoat**.

Every year the Israelites commemorated what was called the Day of Atonement. That was the only day in the year when the High Priest was allowed to enter all the way into the Sanctuary and into the Holy of Holies, to make atonement for his sin and for the Holy of Holies, because of the uncleanness of the people. (Lev. 16:6, 16) But also a part of this day was the banishment of the scapegoat. First, the High Priest had to bathe in water, then sacrifices were offered, and then the “liturgy of the scapegoat” began. We read of this in Leviticus:

“And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.” (Lev. 16:20-22)

Or, to put that in other words, the scapegoat was **thrown out into the wilderness with the wild animals**, to bear all the sin and guilt of the people, never to return. It was a very vivid and graphic depiction of your sins being taken away from you. Of another bearing your sin, and paying the price for you. The scapegoat being banished so you would not be banished. The scapegoat dying in the wilderness, among the wild animals, so that you would not die in the wilderness of your sin, among the evil and satanic beasts of this world.

And Mark wants you to know, that’s what Jesus is here to do for you! First Jesus bathes in His baptism in the Jordan River, just as the High Priest had to bathe. The same water that washes all of our sins away and washes them off of us puts them upon him. And He is then driven out into the wilderness, among the wild animals. And with that vivid and graphic depiction, Mark wants you to see the same picture as the children of Israel did on the Day of Atonement. And to know that Jesus has come to bear your sin *in your place*; that Jesus has come to die *in your place*; that Jesus has come to be your scapegoat, and

take the blame *in your place*.

And Satan knew it! Which is why he tried so hard to get Jesus to sin in the wilderness, tempting Jesus in all sorts of manners and ways. For to get Jesus to sin would mean that Jesus would be out there bearing His own sin, not ours. And His suffering and death would be to atone for His own sin, and not ours. And so Satan had at Him, for 40 days, doing all in his power to trip Jesus up and return our sins to us. And so as Jesus took all of our sins, as our scapegoat, Satan was trying to give them all back! . . . But Satan failed!

But know that Jesus is not like the scapegoat in *every* way, because on the Day of Atonement there were actually **two** animals that were offered – the scapegoat, and one whose blood was shed. The Old Testament scapegoat pointed to Jesus and His work of redemption for us, and Mark *wants* us to see this fulfillment in Jesus. But there is also an important difference – for unlike the scapegoat, Jesus returned from the wilderness. The scapegoat never returned to Israel, and if it ever did, there would have been great dread and horror at its return – at the sins of the people coming back to them! But in returning from the wilderness, Jesus was not bringing the sins of the people back to them, He was returning *to also be the other animal*, the sacrificial one, to shed His blood as the Lamb of God on the cross. He is at one and the same time the dirty, sin-filled, goat who with all of our sin is deserving of death, and the perfect, innocent, sinless Lamb, not deserving of death, but put to death to atone for our sins. He is both! He is all in all, so that in Him, our sins might be dealt with, once and for all!

And they have been dealt with once and for all, for with His death on the cross, Jesus took all of our sins and did take them where they belong, down into the grave and hell, and then rose to life again without them. Like the scapegoat, He took them away from us, never to return. They are separated from us, as the psalmist says, ***“as far as the East is from the West.”*** . . . Which, by the way, did you ever wonder about that saying? *“As far as the East is from the West?”* Ever wonder why it doesn’t say *“As far as the North is from the South?”* Its because north and south actually meet. If you picture the globe, and imagine yourself flying north, there is a point at which you will no longer be going north but will actually be flying south. And the same things happens if you’re flying south – you will eventually change and be flying north. They meet. But that never happens with east and west. You can be flying east and you will never stop flying east. East and West never meet – unless you turn around to go back to where you came from! And so in Christ, you can be sure that you and your sin will never again meet, because your Lamb, your scapegoat, your Saviour, has taken them away from you. And they are never coming back again!

And so Mark ends this section of his Gospel with the proclamation of Jesus, ***“The time is fulfilled,”*** – the Old Testament is being fulfilled – ***“and the kingdom of God is at hand;”*** – literally, quite literally, at hand. For you can touch the King! – ***“repent and believe in the Gospel.”*** Believe in this Gospel, that Mark is pointing you to. Of Jesus as your substitute, your scapegoat. Repent and place all of your sins on His head, for He takes them all away. For as with Abraham, God has provided your substitute. And there is now no longer anything that can separate us from the love of God. As we heard from Romans, ***“He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?”*** Indeed He does give us all things, and is even here and now giving them, that we lack nothing. So come and receive His gifts again at His Table, drink deeply of His Word, and receive His forgiveness. Your Saviour who was crucified has risen and is here for you. ***“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.”*** So come, and receive, from His hand!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.