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Genesis 9: 8 – 17
 1 Peter 3: 18 – 22

Ps. 25: 1 - 9
 Mark 1: 9 – 15

“In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

John is very good at what he does. He is the ideal messenger from God to get people’s attention and get their hearts and minds turned back around to God. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He is a messenger and a baptizer. And he’s also a pretty good community organizer. Despite the fact that he wears camel hair, has locust-breath and seems to like to yell a lot, people flock to him. They are drawn to him. Ordinary people and high-ranking people. He baptizes out in the middle of the wilderness, not near any towns or cities, and yet the crowds continue to come and seek him out.

Some of the people are deeply impacted by what John has to say and they participate in his baptism. Others probably come out of sheer curiosity. Still others, notably the Temple leaders, come out to check on John’s orthodoxy and to curb his ability to influence people negatively about the Temple. After all, John’s message is that folks can be baptized right here, right now in the River Jordan. They don’t need to go to the Temple with all their rituals and sacrifices. They don’t need to exchange coins with the money changers. They don’t need to buy the turtle doves or lambs or whatever the official sacrifice demands. They don’t need to drop money into the mite boxes. They can meet God and turn to follow God right here. And so the people come from all over Jerusalem and the Judean countryside and perhaps further, just to get a look at this odd, yet strangely prophetic man.

Many people come because they have heard about John’s message and they want to come, confess their sins and start all over again. After all, what’s not to like about laying down the burdens of the past – burdens of failures and disappointments, broken relationships and hurts? But probably what they don’t realize is that in coming together, they are coming together as the people of God into community. They are coming together to *be* the people of God in a new way.

Whether the folks who are coming to John in earnest know it or not, they are renewing their covenant with God, and with one another. The covenant that we hear about in Genesis today. The covenant where God says to Noah and his sons, *“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you...”* It’s also a renewal of the covenant that God makes with Abraham, *“I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you through their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”* God desires to be in relationship with the people of God. And the folks who take John seriously realize that they want the same thing. And so, they come. They come together. In community. A community focused on being in a right relationship with God and with one another.

Somehow, Jesus hears about what John is doing, and so he comes all the way from Galilee to be baptized by him. Not because he has any burdens to confess and lay down, but because he comes to identify with the people of God who are truly seeking God. And immediately afterwards, immediately after becoming a part of this new community, Jesus is impelled – or perhaps compelled or propelled – by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness, a place of isolation and no community (well, perhaps excepting the wild beasts and the ministering angels). A place where there is only God on whom to depend, where there are no other human voices or hugs or laughter or shoulders. Day turns into night and night turns into day. Forty days (or thereabouts) of only the wind and the birds and other creatures

to listen to (not counting the adversary's oily voice of temptation). Forty days of aloneness, of hoping and praying. Until one day, there is another flutter of something like a dove's wings, and Jesus is able to leave the wilderness, the aloneness, behind.

Throughout the history of the people of God, our spiritual forebears have all spent time wrestling in those barren wildernesses of aloneness. As do we now. Those wildernesses become the places of refining and self-discovery. For some, the wilderness places are even respites from the crush of other people, but for many, they are places of quiet and isolation where introspection happens. Whether respite or isolation, none of our forebears, none of us (whether we are aware of it or not) have ever truly been alone in the wilderness. We have been in a different kind of community, in the company of ministering angels and God's creation. God journeys with Noah and Abraham. God journeys with the people of Israel. God journeys with John and the people who come out to the wilderness to find him. God journeys with Jesus. God journeys with us, into the wilderness, and then again as we return to the *gift* of community.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we need both wildernesses and community. And sometimes, our communities even need the wilderness. We need to spend time together looking at ourselves and our world in order to find new, resurrected life, new ministry, new ways of being the people of God together. Jesus is impelled or compelled into the wilderness, and Jesus is also impelled or compelled to return and to take up his ministry in the wider community.

Every Sunday, in the post-communion prayer, we say something about going out to do the work that God has given us to do. As a community of the people of God. And we go, either in our individual ways and yet fueled by this community of Trinity, or together in partnership, reflecting the community we have here in Trinity. God is calling us, just as John calls folks, to a new future. God has work for us to do, and that work begins as we draw on the strength of our community to be like ministering angels in a world desperately longing for hope and for help.

We come together in community to discover anew the joy of being God's beloved people.
We come together in community to learn once again what it means to be and to live as God's beloved, and to pass that on to others and to the next generation.

We come together in community to listen to the voice of God calling us and speaking to us.
We come together in community to see more clearly the Christ manifested in one another.
We come together in community because, as the Body of Christ, we are one of the ways in which God is made manifest in this world.

We come together in community because we are one body, with Jesus Christ as the head.

In the words of the Rev. Deon Johnson:

*Till all the jails are empty and all the bellies filled;
Till no one hurts or steals or lies, and no more blood is spilled;
Till age and race and gender no longer separate;
Till pulpit and press and politics are free of greed and hate:
God has work for us [this community] to do.*

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