**Gospel**: Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” 12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

**Message**: Wild Beasts

For those of us of a certain vintage, we might remember a song that began, “When an irresistible force such as you, meets an old immovable object like me, you can bet as sure as you live, something’s got to give . . .” This is a theological paradox in that God’s irresistible force in God’s relentless purpose for a peaceful cosmos comes head-to-head with God’s immovable compassion for bumbling, destructive and often beastly humanity. Something’s got to give. The *something* that gives is God. There are numerous natural forces on earth and in the heavens that have the potential of being very destructive. Often these forces are blamed on God, as we continue to try to create God in our own image. If someone crosses us, **we** want to get even. God’s covenant, however, promises that God will not destroy the world; the rainbow is the sign as the story goes. God’s covenant demonstrates the unity of all creation under God’s ownership. In this unity of nature and relationships we learn that the action of one does have an effect on other(s). Distance and size do not matter. Take one starfish out of the tidal pool and the mussels take over negatively affecting the overall health and balance of that environmental system. One supernova millions of light years away, causes ripples in the gravitational affect of distant galaxies. (It may take a while for us to notice.) One person committing a sinful evil act against a neighbor disrupts the peace and prosperity of the community, whether it is one person offending one other person or one megalomaniac affecting nations.

On the other hand, one gesture of kindness also expands outward to others. God’s purpose remains for the peace and unity of the cosmos beginning with the smallest of community units. Within our unified community or system, diversity is what maintains health and strength. No matter how large or seemingly insignificant, each element has an important part in that system to do good. I was out in our woods a couple weeks ago cutting up and stacking some of the downed trees. The ground under some of those trees that had been down for a while had the fine white threads of mycelium in the soil. These are the heart of the fungal system that breaks down the dead organic materials, connects individual plants together to transfer water, nitrogen, carbon and other minerals. It also (get this!) sends out early notices for nutrients to be shared with struggling saplings or trees in ill health. (Not just humans that bring chicken soup to the sick.) Diversity makes life interesting and exciting. All creation depends on God’s active compassion working through humans and the plant/animal world. **All life,** whether aware or not, depends ultimately for survival on that unfathomable Life Force beyond creation and human comprehension.

Humanity’s responsibility is to be **stewards** of both the earth and each other. Humans, however, often behave far more savagely than the wild beasts. Our aggression rises out of selfish gain, jealousy, and personal autonomy. Cain is given ominous credit for the first murder, but even in that, God **marked** Cain to protect him as he went into the wilderness of the world. God continues to remain loyal and faithful to disloyal humanity. God is willing to accept the hurt and pain in order to keep **hope** alive. Immutable unchanging God refuses to give up on humanity. In so doing, God entered the wilderness of earth, limiting God’s self in the form of a human with a human heart, a human named Jesus. Jesus himself was, in human form, a wild beast of a sort. C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, depicts the Christ figure as Aslan, a great golden lion. The Prevense children learn from some of the Naria residents that Aslan, although not a **savage** beast, is not a tame lion. Aslan/Jesus will not be domesticated to conform to conventional society **or** religion. Jesus will not adhere to “sit, fetch or beg” in human society. Jesus listens deeply and carefully only to God.

Jesus begins his walk on the wild side on the shore of the Jordan River a few miles outside of Jerusalem, a good 70+ miles from Nazareth. What had brought him to that area of Israel? Was he purposely coming to John the Baptizer or just happened to be passing by? Had he had any physical connection with John other than the *in utero* time pregnant Elizabeth and Mary had for a few months? What motivated Jesus to jump in Jordan at that moment? Until this precise moment, did he fully know who he was? These are questions for another time. Many narratives have been written about the times leading up to this moment, but who knows for certain? What is known is that as he came out of the water, Jesus had a vision and heard a voice. (We’ve had visions/dreams and heard that still silent voice.) **He** saw the heavens torn apart. The verb for “torn” is the same verb used when the veil in the Holy of Holy’s was was rent at the climax of the crucifixion signaling the open communication between heaven and earth, direct communication between God and humanity. Boundaries had been eliminated disrupting the complex flowchart established by humans used for forgiveness of sin.

Jesus heard a voice from beyond the finite, **affirming** him as the Beloved Son with whom God is well pleased. Now, said the voice, head into the wilderness for a length of time to **be** with God, to **talk** with God, to **lear**n from God, to be **strengthene**d by God, to **resist** temptations that are not from God. This baptism of the Holy Spirit, this delighted in-dwelling of all the fullness of God, empowered human Jesus to re-enter the wilderness of this world with a passionate ministry and mission of urgency to tell of the in-breaking of the reign of God (Like the mycelium, a humble life form that does so much good). The transforming power of the Holy Spirit **disrupts** life as usual. There is a gentle, disruptive, yet nourishing effect, that brings a renewal, re-purposing, and re-dedication of the soul. If/When we listen to the Voice beyond the finite, our spiritual baptism affirms, as Jesus said, that we are no longer servants, but friends, brothers and sisters, and, therefore, beloved children of God. God’s unconditional love, as God gave God’s self in Jesus Christ proves that there is no limit to which God will go to save the wild beasts of humanity. It may not appear on the surface that God is active, but underneath, like the thin threads of mycelium, God is nourishing and communicating and empowering us to **believe** the gospel of Jesus Christ, **live** the gospel of Jesus Christ and **proclaim** the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord be with you. Amen.

**Prayers of the People/the Lord’s Prayer**: O God, we come before you, a diverse group, a patchwork of pressures and anxieties. Many are tire; many are alone; many are imprisoned by the various shackles of the world. Refresh us,; comfort us; free us. Help us to make that difficult passage from time past to time now. Help us to live in your Presence. Help us to find peace, through the love of Jesus Christ who continues to teach us as we pray, “Our Father . . .”

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: We are thankful for You, O God and the richness of your blessings. Thank you for the world and its beauty: cities and towns, fields and farms, flowers and trees. You have given us family, friends and neighbors and we are grateful to You for friendship and love. We are surrounded by kind hearts, smiling faces, and helping hands, for all who care for others. You have given us Jesus to show us how to live. Thank you for the shower of blessings.

**Benediction**: The peace of God that passes all understanding be with you now and forever. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

**Old Testament Reading**: Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

12God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

**New Testament Reading**: 1Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.