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<sup>9</sup> Jesus... was baptised by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> Coming up out of the water, He immediately saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." <sup>12</sup> The Spirit immediately drove Him into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> And He was there in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan... <sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. From Mark 1:9-15 (Selected verses: TLV, *alt*)

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When children are young we may watch them play various game: building things; attending to 'sick toy', pretending to be famous sports people, driving to cars, and so many other things they see adults do. As we watch them play, so often (without thinking), they are imagining what they will be like when they grow older.

Jesus Himself was a child. We may also imagine what His parents were thinking when He was brought to the Temple at eight days old, or when He was teaching in the Temple at 12 years of age, or becoming a carpenter like Joseph. How as the life of Jesus shaped from infancy, through to the time He began that ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, and proclaiming the kingdom of God?

As Christians we have seen many people baptised. We hear the promises made by parents (and 'sponsors') that they will: "be responsible for a person's upbringing in the church, remembering them in their prayers, bringing them to the services in God's house, teaching the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, reminding people of their baptism, striving to set a good example, and provide for instruction in the faith." How do we 'grow in the grace of our baptism'?

In the baptism of Jesus, God does something very special, which highlights that Jesus' baptism is different from ours, not least because Christ Himself was sinless, and we are baptised because we are sinners. In His Baptism, Jesus steps out into our world of sin and death in a very special way.

In Mark's Gospel, we hear that Jesus begins his ministry "at the right time." He didn't arbitrarily find himself in the role of Saviour. He arrived at God's perfect time. As they say, "Timing is everything." We see this is especially true in Jesus' life: At the right time, He came to the right place, and He came for the right task. St. Mark tells us that Jesus deliberately sought out John the Baptist and entered with him into the Jordan River. As Jesus walked from the river, He entered into the work He was sent and ordained to accomplish: The redemption of all humanity from our sins.

The Baptism of Jesus should always be understood in a different way from the baptism we often see of infants and adults. Romans 6 and John 3 and Acts 2 and Colossians 2 and First Peter 1 (which we heard today) all point to how baptism joins *us* to Jesus in His death and resurrection. But in His baptism, as Jesus begins His public ministry in this world, *Jesus has joined Himself* to us in our struggle against sin, death and the devil. In the River Jordan Jesus was baptised in the same waters as sinners – with sinners. He identifies with sinners. This is what He would do in His whole ministry.

Baptised with sinners, and crucified between two convicted criminals (who acknowledged their sin), Jesus saw Himself as the one who gives His life for sinners. This is also why Jesus was immediately led out into the desert to confront the loneliness we so often feel. This is why Jesus went into the wilderness to experience temptations we so often face. This is why Jesus went into the lonely place to confront our fears in 'being with' wild beasts'. (And it is fascinating here that St. Mark adds that Jesus was in the wilderness with wild beasts. Many Bible scholars believe that Mark wrote this Gospel from Rome and in the time when Christians were facing wild beasts in the Colosseum. It would also be a comfort to them that as they had to face the wild beasts, Jesus had faced such beasts also).

Our lives can so often be like a 'wilderness'. Of course, we are not speaking here in a material sense, but a metaphorical sense. Materially, none of us experiences the sorts of 'wildernesses' that people of the past had to experience. Advances in technology (and transport) see none of us isolated like people long ago. Our supermarkets provide us with food beyond the imagination of even one generation ago. There is so much activity that surrounds our lives that we all can 'fill our days' with things to do.

Yet so often we still experience 'wilderness'. Fightings and fears at home, breakdown of relationships, and all the evils of the world can make us feel that there is a 'wilderness' in our lives. Add to that those times when we know we have done wrong, when we know we have hurt others, when we know we have succumbed to the evil in this world, it is not too difficult to identify the 'wilderness' (desert) experiences in our own lives.

But God has stepped into these 'wilderness experiences' in Jesus. As the writer to the Hebrews says (4:15): "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin".

Every day in our lives we face 'tests': the 'tests' to be good husbands and wives; the 'test' to be good parents or children; the 'test' to be responsible citizens; the 'test' to be faithful members of God's church. At times we may like to think that we are 'doing alright'. But it is hard to be humble if you think you are perfect in every way...

Thus, it is important to remember that returning from the wilderness, Jesus begins to proclaim the in-breaking of God's reign (or "kingdom"). To speak of a "reign" means to characterise Jesus' ministry as announcing the realisation of God's intentions for humanity and all creation. That is, Jesus announces the dawn of a new era and a new state of affairs, one in which God rules. He tells those who listen that God is bringing new realities into existence; Jesus Himself will demonstrate what these realities look like through His words and deeds, ultimately His death on the cross...

Here is a question for you: So why was Jesus in the wilderness for forty days? Forty is the number of weeks that it takes for you to be birthed into the world. The ancient Jews knew that, I think. So could it be that the number forty, used in scripture, has something to do with being born, or reborn. Maybe it has to do with finding new life in the midst of your current life. One could say that the earth was reborn after the forty days of rain in Noah's story.

For the Israelites, coming out of slavery and wandering in the wilderness for forty years was rebirth for their people. They were going to start again in a new land and under new leadership. There is a different 'purpose', a different 'identity' to life, given through Jesus...

In this season of Lent we are again encouraged to remember our 'identity' in Christ. We are to 'repent' and 'believe the good news' (and the Greek verbs here are present imperatives. In other words, this is to be a continual action. It's not a 'one-off act'). We are called to be living in a continual state of 'repentance'. And we are called to a continual state of 'belief'.

As we enter the Lenten season of forty days, you and I are invited to be rebirthed; to let the old ways of life that have become destructive fall away and to be rebirthed to live life in a new way; to commit to a new way of being; to rediscover a new way of living in those words spoken to us at our baptism; to recall those life-creating words of God for us. I realise not everyone here is baptized. Which is why it is important to remember that in baptism we hear the promise that God has already claimed you.

Lent is a much deeper season than simply giving up sweets and chocolate. It is a season that leads us to new life through death. New life, rebirth, through hearing the claiming words that you belong to God and you are God's beloved.

The father of our church, Martin Luther, once wrote: "Every morning when I wake up, I remind myself: I am baptised." Firstly, this means that he could begin each day with a clean slate, so to speak, since he knew he was a child of God, beloved and forgiven. But even more than that, Luther reminded himself that he is called to live out of the abundance of baptismal grace, and to be generous in every good gift. What a great spiritual practice!

This is what we remember today. In Jesus we are refreshed, renewed, forgiven, and gifted beyond measure. And we belong: to each other, as we share in the ONE baptism of our Lord – we've all been washed in the same waters, and those waters are the great equaliser in the eyes of God – but first and foremost, we belong to God. Just as God opened the heavens and Jesus' baptism with the words, 'You are My Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased,' any baptism becomes a place where heaven and earth meet, and where God declares, yes, to each and every one of you, and to the world: "You are My child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Dwell in this gift. Amen.