

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Every time I hear this reading from Mark,

of Jesus' baptism and then being driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit,

I find myself thinking of Isle Royale, my own personal wilderness.

I know we visited just a few weeks ago, so to speak,

but it has been on my heart and mind a lot of late.

Even after visiting the Holy Land and seeing the wilderness Jesus was driven to,

Isle Royale remains my favorite wilderness,

and continues to be the spiritual refuge of my heart.

Even when I can't physically get there,

it lives so strongly in my memory

that I can close my eyes and be there in an instant.

I don't get there often,

indeed, it's been over 25 years since I last walked the island,

but every time I went I was changed.

Isle Royale is not a desert like the wilderness Jesus went to, far from it,

but it is a wilderness of another kind.

It is an island in the middle of Lake Superior

that is about 8 miles wide and 42 miles long.

The only way there is by boat,

and the only way around the island is by foot.

While you are there you live in a wilderness

where there are no water spigots

and no flush toilets

and no showers.

The only running water is a stream, if you can find one,

and baths are taken in lakes that are rarely warmer than 55 degrees or so.

Every time I go I gain a new awareness  
of the incredible wealth of water that we have here in America.  
It is a wealth that blinds us to the truly precious nature of water.  
In my time apart  
as I walked through the green forests  
and over rocky ridges and exposed roots,  
the gurgle of water in my canteen was a constant companion.  
Whenever we would cross a stream or stop by a lake  
we took time to top off our canteens  
because we never knew when we would get the chance again.  
The work of collecting water and filtering it for use  
became a ritual activity.  
Water was treasured and conserved and never wasted.  
The simple pleasure of a swallow of water  
became a heavenly experience.  
Every time I returned to civilization I would tell myself  
that I would remember that truth.  
But somehow I never did.  
I would continue to enjoy glasses of water for a couple of weeks,  
but soon it had to be water with ice cubes.  
And then it'd be back to soda or juice  
and water would become something utilitarian  
for washing dishes or flushing toilets.  
Something taken for granted.  
I would have forgotten.  
Water.  
We are surrounded by it;  
filled with it;  
made of it.

Most of our body is water.

When light runs into water it bends around it,  
bounces off it,  
and shines through it.

Did you know that it takes three things to make a rainbow;  
water, dust and sunlight.

How wonderfully lenten!

Raindrops form when water condenses and gathers around specks of dust in the air.  
As the sunlight shines on the raindrops it is bent as it enters the raindrop,  
reflected off the other side of the raindrop  
and bent again as it leaves the raindrop.

These two bends act on the light  
to split it into the colors we see in the rainbow.

Water is a symbol that infuses our readings today.

It is water that God uses to destroy the world.

It is water that lifts the Ark and surrounds it.

It is water and light that form the clouds and the rainbow in the heavens.

It is water that closes over the head of Jesus,  
and that he rises up out of in his Baptism.

And, it is water that baptized each of us  
in the name of the Father,  
and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit.

We have each been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism,  
and marked as Christ's own forever.

In response to this gift of the Holy Spirit,  
we first promise to "continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship,  
in the breaking of bread,  
and in the prayers?"

As we begin our journey through the five baptismal promises

I invite you to reflect on this foundation of all apostolic teaching.

As we hear again the story of Jesus' baptism,

remember that it is our own baptism

that both welcomes us into this fellowship,

and empowers us for ministry;

and so, ultimately gives us the strength to continue.

That first step in responding to God's call to us,

is a pledge to continue to gather together.

In this pledge we are reminded

that faith is not an individual undertaking,

but a corporate one.

Not something we have or do by ourselves,

but something we have or do in community.

The apostles discovered very early on,

that Christ became present to them in both powerful and personal ways

when they gathered together

and even more so when they broke bread together.

It is a great truth that we rediscovered the power of during the pandemic

by our enforced absence from that breaking of the bread.

Spiritual communion and virtual gathering via zoom

though helpful in some ways,

still left us feeling alone and disconnected

in so many other ways.

This is but one of the great truths that the disciples passed on

to the church through the rite of baptism.

As their heirs,

it is a truth that we too dedicate ourselves to passing on.

We do this, not simply because they did it so many years ago,

but because again and again we find today  
what they found all those years ago.

To be a follower of Christ

is to gather with others in fellowship,  
to teach and learn,  
and break bread together.

And when we do this, we discover Christ in our midst,  
among us and within us, and working through us to repair the world.

And there is one more thing.

Gathering in communities of fellowship and support,  
teaching and learning, is vitally important,  
but it is not enough.

Even gathering to break bread together is not enough.

It is not enough

because the church does not exist for itself.

It exists for others, those outside of the church.

The first indication of this greater theme of the later promises,  
we find in the last four words of our first promise...

“and in the prayers.”

Even before we can find the words,

the Spirit prays with us and for us in sighs too deep for words.

The centrality of prayer is a further indication  
of the importance God places on relationship,  
first with God,  
and second with each other.

Prayer acknowledges,

builds,

and repairs all of our relationships.

With God and with each other.

One cannot truly pray for someone  
and not be moved to compassion.

By dedicating ourselves to prayer,  
and working to expand and deepen our prayer,  
we begin the hard work of seeing  
and moving beyond ourselves and our needs  
to the gospel work of repairing the relationships  
that are so much a part of this world.

All we have to do is look around  
to see that we truly have work to do.

So...

Will you continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship,  
in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

I will with God's help.

-- Amen