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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
First Sunday of Lent
February 21, 2021
Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Some of the images that have stunned me the most during the coronavirus pandemic have been the pictures and videos of health care providers who attend to Covid patients putting on personal protective equipment just to enter a patient's hospital room. The CDC website outlines a 7-step process for putting on PPE when caring for patients with Covid, including hand sanitizing, putting on an isolation gown, donning an N95 filtering facepiece respirator, putting on a face shield or goggles and gloves, and then removing them in the same number of steps in a very particular manner. Like a soldier fitted for battle, the equipment that health care providers wear doesn't prevent them from danger, but protects them in the midst of it. If it wasn't for their trust in that protective shell of PPE to keep them safe and healthy, and for their willingness to serve in the heart of the coronavirus wilderness, countless patients with Covid would have no one to care for them.

On this first Sunday of Lent when we've just embarked on our 40-day Lenten journey, we hear of Jesus' 40-day journey in the wilderness. In the gospel of Mark it's super short: After his baptism, it says "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

Though Mark doesn't say it – and there are plenty of details that the gospel of Mark doesn't include – I'm guessing Jesus didn't want to be there in the wilderness, where Satan and wild beasts made him unsafe and vulnerable.

Most of the time we don't want to be in the "wilderness," either, where situations like health concerns or aging or broken relationships or school or work stress make us feel unsafe. Like health care workers caring for patients with Covid, it's almost like we also need emotional and spiritual PPE to protect us when we are in situations that make us feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, or in danger.

Well, I know there's a reason that in each of the 3 synoptic gospels where this story of Jesus' temptation occurs, it happens immediately after his baptism. The very first agenda item on Jesus' ministry list is 40 days in the wilderness being tempted and unsafe. Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus faced in the wilderness, but we do know that Jesus got through it, because the next thing he does is travel to Galilee proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come near. How Jesus got through that 40 days is tied directly to what happened just beforehand.

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and then "drove" him into the wilderness. This might seem like God putting Jesus in danger, but taking that more literally, maybe the Spirit was actually like a "driver," accompanying Jesus into difficult territory protecting her precious cargo, like parents or guardians carefully buckling children in their car seats before they drive through rain and snow. The Spirit that descended on Jesus in baptism was like spiritual and emotional PPE that protected Jesus in the wilderness and from the temptations of the devil. The Spirit didn't route Jesus away from danger, but protected Jesus through danger. Just like the Spirit does for us, too.

Now it's helpful to remember that there's no place in the Bible that says, if you believe in Jesus, you'll never go through hard things, you'll never face vulnerability, or discomfort, or fear. But what the Bible does promise, and what our baptism assures us, is that just like the Spirit was Jesus' PPE in the wilderness, in our baptism the Spirit encases us with spiritual and emotional PPE to get us through wilderness times, so that we too can proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Last Sunday you might have watched our worship service where I preached from the top of Oyster Dome. What you didn't see in that worship service were the multiple takes it took me to get my phone on a mini-tripod perched on a tree branch, and you didn't hear my cussing when I picked up my phone after it fell from the tree branch onto the rock where I was sitting and I saw all the cracks on my screen.

I was really bummed because I knew I had put a screen protector on my phone, but what I didn't realize, and what I learned from someone at church who had the same thing happen to them: the cracks were only on the screen protector. When I pulled it off, the screen underneath had been completely protected.

The Holy Spirit that protected Jesus in the wilderness, that same Spirit that steers us through emotionally and spiritually difficult times, is like PPE or my phone's screen protector. Yes, life for all of us is difficult. Yes, we will still be uncomfortable and vulnerable. Yes, bad things will happen sometimes. But think of what life would be like if you didn't have the Holy Spirit with you, kind of like what life would be like without heroic health care workers in their PPE caring for patients with Covid.

The time of Lent is a time of preparation for baptism, and a return to God and the promises God made in baptism. So use this 40 days to claim the promise of spiritual and emotional PPE you received from the Holy Spirit in baptism. When you go through hard times, remember that the Holy Spirit is encasing you in love as you travel through the wilderness. And never forget what God said to you in baptism, the same thing God said to Jesus: you are my child, I love you, and with you I am well pleased. Amen.