

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-151

Peter 3:18-22

Grounded in the Baptismal Covenant—Called into the Wilderness

Well, this morning is of particular note. The Canadian Men's Hockey team started playing in the Olympic gold medal game at 8:10 EST and even those of us who managed to get to church today, given the pull to watch the game, are anxiously wanting to know the score. This is the last day of the Olympics, which has brought the country together in heartache and jubilation. I would hazard to guess that most every Canadian has at least paid some attention to the Olympics, while others have been immersed in all of it or, in particular sports.

For the athletics themselves, as well as their families, these moments have been years in the making. Dutifully dedicating time, energy, and money in order to even have a chance to attend the games let alone medal in them. Their lives are dictated by the rituals, the practices, the obedience it takes to excel in their sport. And for a time, we all come along side them to watch and to wait in anticipation of the promise that all of this is worth it, come what may.

The Christian faith has some correlations with the same spirit of relentless dedication, obedience, and hard work of an athlete with both sports, at that caliber, and faith, requiring discipline, perseverance, and focus. And both hold promise. However, unlike the athlete who has to put in the work ahead of time in order to achieve their goals, for those who believe in God, the heavy lifting has already been done for us in the work of Christ.

Now if you hadn't realized it yet, today is the first Sunday of Lent. This is a particular season in the church's calendar that marks the 40 days that come before Easter. The beginning of Lent started with Ash Wednesday, which has the purpose of reminding us of our humanity in all its frailty and uncertainty. This is not to make us feel badly about ourselves, but rather is intended to help us put our trust firmly in the soil of God's love and provision, in other words - God's grace.

You may have heard me share the definition of grace before as Professor Rolf Jacobson explains it, grace is, "The free gift in which God gives all – eternal life, forgiveness, purpose, meaning – to human beings, who respond by trying to earn it."

Grace is a gift. It is what we call covenant.

Covenants are basically the ways God maintains a relationship with humanity. Again, using Rolf Jacobsen's words,

“To have a covenant (which means a sacred contract or deal), you have to have these things:

- Two parties (not as in celebrations, but as in two people or peoples, hello!)
- A set of Promises
- A sign (that is, some sign so that you know you are a party to the covenant. [And this is important,] “Because covenant is one of the major ways of understanding how God interacts and maintains relationship with people.”¹

There are four covenants in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. In the scripture reading from Genesis (9:8-17) we heard about the very first covenant God made with people, and “the people” being Noah and his family. Actually, the covenant is with God and all flesh, so this includes animals as well. No less than six times in ten verses it is written in some way or another that the covenant is with Noah and every living creature that is with Noah. On top of that, it is a promise for all future generations. This came after the flood that wiped out every living thing on earth, other than what was on the arc, and God promises to never again destroy the earth with a flood and the sign of that promise was the rainbow.

There were three more covenants in the Old Testament given to each of Abraham, Moses, and David. Then there is the one in the New Testament and it is called the New Covenant. You actually hear me say these words when sharing in communion... “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Each time we take communion we are reminded of the covenant made for us and with us since the time of Jesus, however the promise comes in our baptism. Let’s take a look at the next scripture readings (Mark 1:9-15 and 1 Peter 3:18-22) as they are the ones that speak to the new covenant between God and humanity. In the gospel of Mark we get the story of Jesus’ own baptism with water and as the scripture says, “as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Ron Reinstra, the writer of this sermon series puts it this way, “Before Jesus ever recruits disciples, before he preaches a sermon or heals a single soul, he steps down into the waters of baptism and plants himself squarely in our garden, insisting on taking on our estrangement from God.”²

When we are baptised, it is a reminder of the covenant that God made with any who would believe that this mystery, this covenant of grace, is God’s promise for humanity. And what is the promise? It is the promise of forgiveness of sins, eternal life, meaning

¹ Ibid. Page 46

² By [Ron Rienstra. Grounded and Growing—Journeying from Lent to Easter: A Year of Grounded and Growing | Reformed Worship.](#) Accessed January 26, 2026.

and purpose, God's guidance, blessings, and so much more. It is grace, the gift freely given.

And Peter reminds us that just as Noah and his family were saved through water, now the waters of baptism symbolize our own cleansing. We are baptised in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our baptism is the promise of God with us in what is called a covenant of grace.

Now a side note, God is still working in and through you even if you haven't been baptized. Baptism is an outward sign of an invisible grace or gift. We have to live into it, internalize it. There are some people who live into that grace filled life even though they have never been baptized. Yet to be baptised is to recognize, celebrate, and respond to the free gift of grace.

Here is the challenge. We have the gift. We don't have to earn it. We don't have to put in hours to prove that we are worthy or fit enough, however if we want to understand grace, experience grace more fully, then, in some respects like an athlete, we need to put in the hours, the discipline, the obedience, in order to internalize the outward sign of grace we have received. We can be baptized and do nothing with that, or we can spend the time in the reading of scripture, mediating on the word, study, and prayer and deepen our understanding and in so doing deepen our awareness of what God is doing in, with, and through us.

And though these are practices we benefit from at all times, the season of Lent can be a reset, a reintroduction, or a deepening of our faith and our trust in God to be with us.

Once again, I take from Ron Rienstra, as he writes, "Lent is not a proving ground for spiritual stamina. It is not a contest of willpower or a crash diet for the soul. It is a season of trust—trust that the God who set a rainbow in the sky, who saves through water, and who names Jesus as 'beloved Son' is the same God who meets us in dry places, thin places, and hungry places."³

You will note that immediately after Jesus was baptized, and before going out to minister to others, Jesus went into the wilderness. You might also note the correlation between the 40 days that Jesus was in the wilderness and the 40 days of Lent and even the 40 days and nights of rain that flooded the earth in the story of Noah. These 40 days in the wilderness were a time of preparation for the ministry that would come next. This experience paved the ways for Jesus to trust in God's provision. It can be a time of formation for us as well. To learn to trust God fully to provide and be present for us.

Let me close with words from this series, "Lent is a season of being grounded and growing. Grounded in God's covenant love, in the promises spoken over us in baptism,

³ Ibid.

and in the mercy that meets us even in our sin. And we are growing – growing in repentance, trust, obedience, and hope.”⁴

May you take this time, these days from now until Easter to prepare. See it as a time of wilderness wandering. A way to remember who you are as a child of God, and image bearer of God, and then to discover your purpose in and with the community of other people seeking to do the same.

⁴ Ibid.