

I understand the timing of Pastor Paul's retirement. We're past the busy Christmas season and at the beginning of Lent we're well before Easter. Still though, many people have the practice of giving something up for Lent. I've never heard of a church deciding to give up their pastor for Lent! Of course you don't get him back at Easter.

The gospel reading for this Sunday fits our situation perfectly today. It is the account of the Holy Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness right after his baptism. We always use this scene from Jesus' life on the first Sunday in Lent. The discipline of Lent is rooted in the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness.

The beginning of a time without a pastor can feel a lot like a wilderness. Pastors are our leaders. They keep things rolling. They maintain orthodoxy, while they are often the innovators. Pastors are present when we have a crisis or a need in our lives. A pastor's style can have a big impact on the personality of the congregation. And, you can just count on a

pastor to provide stability. No pastor can feel like a wilderness.

A wilderness can be a big and scary place. In our gospel reading for today we learn that Jesus was in the wilderness with the wild beasts and he was tempted by Satan. This wilderness account also appears in Matthew's gospel and in Luke's gospel. There we learn that he doesn't eat during this time and he is famished. On the whole it doesn't look like an experience we want to have.

Sometimes I imagine the early settlers in this country as they moved west across the prairies and badlands. How endless they must have seemed - a wilderness stretching on forever in front of them. You and your wagon train travel for a day into the wilderness and it doesn't look like you've made any progress. A second day and a third and maybe even a week of travel would go by with nothing but endlessness ahead. They all must have wondered, "How far does this go?"

When you are looking into the wilderness of not having a pastor the question of, "How far does this go?" naturally comes

into our minds. I wish I could give you an answer. I've been around this synod long enough and I have enough connections that I'm usually pretty in touch with the rumors and behind the scenes information. I know who's going where before it's public. But I've heard nothing about Immanuel. That doesn't mean anything really, other than I can't give you an answer as to how long we will be in this wilderness. Maybe short. Maybe long. You're a strong and healthy congregation with a good reputation. From a pastor's perspective you are a highly desirable place to serve. But we don't exactly have spare clergy coming out of our ears these days.

As the gospel writer Mark tells us about Jesus' time in the wilderness he only devotes two sentences to it. He says, "And 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."

Two things stick out to me from those sentences. One, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. That may not seem like a nice thing to do, but it is the Spirit's will that it happens. Jesus is not captured by the forces of evil and hauled

off. No, it is God's own will; and where it is God's will there will also be support.

That also brings us to the second thing. It is something our English translations miss, but it is clear in the Greek language Mark used. We translate the final phrase as, "...and the angels waited on him." That's not a wrong translation, but it missed the use of the Imperfect Tense that Mark uses. We don't really have the imperfect tense in English but we can get closer to it if we translate that line, "...and the angels were continuously waiting on him." In other words, the angels didn't just show up at the end of the time in the wilderness; as if they were medics cleaning up a patient after a trauma. No, the angels were with him through every step of the way. Every trial, every struggle, every test that he endured, he was not alone. God who drove him into the wilderness was also sending perpetual care.

I could take the sermon in the direction of proclaiming: members of Immanuel, this wilderness is not to be feared. Stay strong, stay faithful, God is with you in it and it will be okay.

I could say that and I could say that in great faith and with all orthodoxy. But that's not the conclusion I feel the Spirit is calling us to have. If that were the conclusion I'd basically be saying we need to hunker down and be protective through this wilderness until a new leader arrives. When he or she arrives then we'll be ready to move again. No, I don't think that's the Spirit's will is for us. And that's not what the angels did for Jesus either. They strengthened him for growth and service.

God's ongoing presence with us always, whether we're in a desolate wilderness or a magical amusement park, means that we are empowered to work at all times.

I suppose this old question can put it in perspective. Does the church of Jesus Christ have a mission? Before you nod your heads to vigorously to say yes, let me say it's a trick question. The answer is, "No, the church of Jesus Christ *does not* have a mission. *The mission of Jesus Christ has a church!*" Do you see the difference? One makes the church an end unto

itself - the church has a mission. The other makes the church a means to an end - the mission has a church.

At the end of the day Immanuel Lutheran Church of Webster New York is not an end unto itself. In and of itself it has no value. Think of it like a man who likes to buy power tools. He may have excellent tools, but if he doesn't use them, if he doesn't build stuff with them, of what value are they? In an of themselves all he can do is take his friends in his garage and show them off.

There's no point in a great church if it isn't a tool that's being used. In the same way God provided support for Jesus throughout his time in the wilderness so he could prepare for his public ministry, God will provide support for Immanuel - not so that it can survive a wilderness; but so that it may be of service to the kingdom now and in the future.

God is up to something big - a project of eternal consequences - the salvation of the world. You have been invited to be a part of that project. (It is an honor and a joy to be called by God to do an essential task.) And you are being

constantly empowered and equipped to do it. And by God you will succeed.

As you enter this time of transition and as we begin the process of seeking a new pastor I want you to go through this process with this image in mind. When all is said and done - when God's ultimate works of restoring this universe are completed - may God look to you and to everyone who ever was a part of Immanuel, all God look at all that Immanuel ever did for God's mission - and have God say, "Well done, my good and faithful servants. Well done!" Amen