

Typically, we think of deserts as hot places. The Sahara Desert, covering over 3 million square miles, averages temperatures of over 100°, year round. The Mohave Desert is home to Death Valley and the highest temperature ever recorded on Earth: 134°. These are hot, hot deserts.

But did you know that deserts don't have to be hot? There is actually such a thing as a cold desert. For example, the entire continent of Antarctica is classified as a desert, even though it reaches -135°. The Gobi Desert in China only gets up to 81° in the summer, while in the winter it can drop to -40°. And there are other cold deserts around the world as well.

The reason for this is that the thing that makes a desert a desert is not its temperature, but its precipitation. Antarctica is a very cold, windy place, but it doesn't actually get that much snow. The Gobi Desert may not get all that hot, but it also gets very, very little rain.

Any place without water is a desert. And without water, you also can't have life. The human body is 90% water. It requires an extraordinary effort for a person to live in any desert, hot or cold.

The same is true for trees. Most species of trees are 75-85% water. They can't live in the desert either. So while you'll find a handful of plants that can survive – cactuses and shrubs and such – you really won't find many trees in the desert at all. And this similarity between humans and trees, and our common need for water to live, is yet another reason why the Tree of Jesse is such a wonderful symbol.

Think back to the Garden of Eden. What were some of its features? Well, it was a garden. It had trees, as we already discussed. It had other plants for Adam to farm. It had animals for Adam to name. But it also had one other defining feature. Genesis 2 says, “*A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.*” The Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates.

The Garden of Eden had water. Lots of water. A great river, large enough to supply water to the entire garden. Large enough to split and form four other great rivers from the one. And because of that water, the Garden of Eden could support life. Plants, animals, trees, and people.

But what do Adam and Eve find when they are cast out of the garden? Well, according to God's curse, they find thorns and thistles and ground that refuses to grow food. Do you know the one place where you can find plenty of thorns and thistles, but not much else that will grow? The desert. To be cast out of the garden was to be cast into the desert.

That was true physically. But it was also true spiritually. To be cast out of the garden was to be cast away from the Tree of Life. It was to be cast away from the presence of God. It was to be cast away from his goodness.

And that is a symbol that has shown up in Scripture time and time again. The desert is not just a place of physical hardship. It's a place of spiritual hardship. A place of sin and temptation and struggle against the desires of the flesh.

When the Israelites leave Egypt, they go into the desert. And what do they do when they get there? They complain. They complain about the lack of food and water. They worship idols of gold and long to be back in the might of Egypt. They are consumed by their sinful doubts and their sinful desires.

But then God gives them water. Not just physical water. He gives them spiritual water. The water of his Word, delivered through the prophet Moses. Which refreshes their souls. So they can survive in this desert – physical and spiritual – for 40 years. And then finally cross the Jordan River and enter into the garden of the promised land.

A similar situation happens to Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. Except, what's interesting is that it's the exact reverse that happens. Jesus starts in the promised land. Passes through the Jordan River. And then goes into the desert. Where he spends 40 days being tempted by the devil, in many of the same ways that the Israelites were tempted over those 40 years.

He's tempted with the desires of the flesh. "Turn these stones into bread," the devil taunts him. He's tempted with idolatry. "All this can be yours if you bow down to me." He's tempted to embrace physical might and authority. "Throw yourself from the temple and show the world how powerful you are."

In response, Jesus rejects the devil at every turn. And in so doing, he does what the Israelites did not. They walked into the desert and immediately began to dry out and die, like a tree without water. They were utterly dependent on God to provide for them, physically and spiritually.

But Jesus shows that even the driest deserts of the world cannot wither the Tree of Jesse. He is God made flesh, dwelling among us. He has no need that the things of this world can fulfill.

Which, I think, should come as no surprise to us. Jesus' temptation in the desert is still amazing, certainly. But does anyone read that and expect that Satan would win? Not really.

No, Jesus' temptation in the desert is significant for another reason. And that significance directly applies to us. And it has to do with what came directly before his temptation.

Remember how I said that Jesus does what Israelites did in reverse? He starts in the Promised Land, crosses over the Jordan River, and ends up in the desert. Well, that crossing over of the Jordan River isn't on dry ground, like it was for Joshua and the Israelites.

No, for Jesus, it was in the water itself. It was his baptism. A baptism that, by John's own announcement, Jesus didn't need. Jesus didn't need to repent. He didn't need to be washed in the Jordan. He didn't need to have his sins forgiven. Because he had no sins to forgive. He is the fullness of all righteousness.

And yet, when he's baptized, he also fulfills all righteous. Not all righteousness for himself, but all righteousness for us. At that moment, he publicly, visibly accepts his role as Messiah. As Christ. As the anointed one of God. Anointed by the water of the Jordan. And by the Holy Spirit, coming down like a dove. He is declared the beloved Son of God.

And he trades places with us. So that his baptism is our baptism. His life is our life. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. We are united with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

A newness of life that normally cannot exist in this world. Because this world is a desert. And we are like trees that dry out and die for lack of water. This world is a place of spiritual hardship. A place of sin and temptation and struggle against the desires of the flesh. And like those Israelites who left Egypt, we are consumed by sinful doubts and sinful desires.

But in baptism, we trade places with Christ and he goes out into the desert in our place. He does battle with the devil and wins in our place. The Tree of Jesse survives in a place where no other tree could.

And as for us, we remain in the waters of the Jordan. We remain in the living waters of Holy Baptism. We hold fast to the promises of God's Word. As David says in the very first Psalm, We delight in the Word of the Lord and we become *"like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither."*

Even in the midst of the desert this world has become, through the life-giving water of Holy Baptism, we walk in newness of life. For we know that all righteousness has been fulfilled for us. That the voice from heaven, spoken to Jesus, was also spoken to us. We are God's beloved sons and daughter. With us the Father is well pleased.

Like the sap that runs through a tree, giving life to all its branches, the water of Holy Baptism is our life blood. It keeps us alive even in the driest times of this life. For it is the water that tells us who we are in Christ. What he has done for us. And where we are going on the last day.

For we will not remain in this desert forever. If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. And in that place, we will walk with God by the river of life once again. Amen.