

March 4, 2026 – Hebrews 2:11-18 & Mark 1:9-13

When we hear the term “for us”, as we are frequently in our Lenten series, two different meanings come to mind. The first one that I think of is “for our benefit.” Christ became incarnate, lived, died, and rose again for our sake.

That's the meaning we get in the Nicene Creed, for example. The creed makes that abundantly clear: “who for us men and for our salvation.” He came down from heaven for us. He was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary for our salvation. For our benefit. Makes sense.

But there's a second sense in which we can use the phrase “for us.” It can also be used to say, “in our place.” You need someone to cover your shift at work: “OK, I'll work those hours for you.” You go out to lunch with a friend and at the end of the meal they say, “No, no, I'll pay the bill for you.”

It's still being done for our benefit. That's still true. But the benefit is in the fact that they have taken our place. They are taking our responsibility upon themselves. They are accepting the consequences of our actions.

I want you to keep that in mind as we look at our readings this evening. We're right at the beginning of Mark's gospel. And, as he typically is, Mark is brief, concise, and straight to the point, covering in 4 verses two events that in other gospels cover an entire chapter.

First, we see Jesus in the waters of the Jordan, being baptized. The fact that Jesus came to John to be baptized in the first place is already kinda confusing. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Crowds came confessing their sins. Tax collectors. Soldiers. Ordinary men and women burdened by guilt. They came because they had failed. Because they needed God's mercy.

But Jesus has no sins to confess. Our epistle from Hebrews is clear in that regard: He is holy. He is the One who sanctifies. He shares our flesh and blood, yet without sin. So why does the sinless One step into sinners' water?

He does it for us. He doesn't come to the Jordan to be cleansed. He comes to be counted with the unclean. He steps into the same river as adulterers and liars and the proud and the greedy. He stands shoulder to shoulder with those who have nothing to offer God except contrition and repentance. He's not confessing His own sin. He's beginning his earthly ministry by taking responsibility for our sin.

The Son of God is identifying with us. He's placing Himself among sinners. He's saying that these are the people for whom He has come. These will be the recipients of the great and blessed exchange of their sin for His righteousness.

And as He stands there in the Jordan, the heavens are opened. The Spirit descends upon Him. The Father's voice declares, “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*”

The Father speaks His delight over the Son precisely as the Son stands in the place of sinners. The Father doesn't withdraw. He doesn't distance Himself. He publicly delights in the Son who has come to bear our burden. Who has come for us.

Because in your baptism you have been joined to Christ. His baptism isn't isolated from yours. He goes first. He sanctifies the water. He fills baptism with Himself. So that when you are baptized into Him, the Father's verdict over the Son becomes His verdict over you. You are beloved. You are well pleasing. You are His child. Not because you've conquered temptation. Not because you've lived a flawless life. But because Christ has stepped into your place.

And then, immediately, everything changes. St. Mark says the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. The same Spirit who descended in gentleness now drives Him into desolation. Forty days of wild beasts, hunger, and Satan. Why? What benefit is there in Jesus fasting in the wilderness? Why does the Spirit drive him into this place of hunger and suffering and temptation?

Well, once again, our Epistle from Hebrews helps us out with that. Because it explains that He had to be made like His brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest. Because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted. In other words, He isn't tempted because He's weak. He's tempted because we're weak.

He goes into the wilderness as the new Adam. Think about the temptation of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve lived in literal paradise. A perfect world without pain or suffering. A garden created as a perfect home for them. Filled with food for the taking. Including, best of all, the Tree of Life.

In other words, they were in the best possible circumstances to resist temptation. They had no reason to defy God's command. They had no reason to doubt God's goodness or provision.

They had food all around them that is good for food and pleasing to the eye and a Tree of Life that is to be desired above all else, for the promise of life in its fruit is the very wisdom of God. And yet, they failed. And if they failed in the best possible circumstance, what hope do any of us have in our circumstances?

Jesus stands as a second Adam, facing the same temptations as the first Adam. And yet, he's not in a garden surrounded by good food. He's in a barren wilderness. Sleeping on hard ground. Surrounded by danger. Hungry in a way that I doubt any of us have ever experienced. He's in the worst possible circumstance. He has every reason to defy his Father's command. He has every reason to doubt his Father's goodness and provision. He has every reason to eat whatever food is offered to him.

And yet, he remains faithful. He remains faithful to his Father's will. He remains faithful in the face of intense suffering. He remains faithful against the devil's temptation.

He remains faithful where Adam did not. He remains faithful where Israel did not. Because Israel went through a similar experience. Forty years in the wilderness without food or water, except that which God provided. What did they do? They grumbled. They rebelled. They made a golden calf and worshipped it.

In his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus is reliving humanity's story. Adam's story. Israel's story. Your story. Every place where you have crumbled under pressure. Every moment when desire or fear or pride has conquered you. Every time you have chosen the easy path over obedience.

He enters that same battlefield. The tempter comes to Him just as he comes to you. He whispers shortcuts. He offers glory without suffering. He tempts Him to grasp with human strength rather than trust in divine provision. And at every place where you have fallen, He stands firm.

He is our substitute. He is obeying for you. He is resisting for you. He is building a record of righteousness in all of the places where you have built a record of failure. And that righteousness isn't kept for Himself. It's given. Counted. Credited to you.

Notice the order of these events. First, the Father declares, "You are my beloved Son." Then comes the wilderness. Baptismal identity first. Trial and temptation second. That order isn't accidental.

Because in your baptism, God has named you as His own. He has united you to Christ. He has spoken His promise over you. And then you walk into the wilderness of this life.

Temptation doesn't mean you're not God's child. Struggle doesn't out cancel your baptism. The devil's assaults are not proof that God has abandoned you. Any more than it meant that the Father had abandoned Jesus.

Your identity doesn't hang on your performance in the wilderness of life. It hangs on Christ's performance. That's what Hebrews tells us: He's merciful because He's been there. He's faithful because He didn't fail. He helps those who are being tempted, not as a distant spectator, not as a harsh judge, but as the victorious One who has already fought and won in our flesh.

As I said in a newsletter article recent, and repeated to the elders just last night, the whole purpose of Lent is to expose our weakness. It forces us to confront how easily we are tempted, how often we fail, how quickly we forget who we are.

But Lent doesn't leave us staring at ourselves. It drives us to Christ. To the One who stepped into the Jordan for us. To the One who walked into the wilderness for us. To the One who stood firm under the devil's assault for us. To the One who died and rose again for us. Lent isn't about what we do. It's about what Christ did in our place. Amen.