My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

When was the last time we read the Bible from its very beginnings, the first book, the first chapter, the first verse? What does it tell us? Well, last week’s scriptures informed us a little bit. Do we remember those words from the Wisdom of Sirach? Of course we do, but just in case, let’s review a little bit. Wisdom was speaking of herself, and how at the beginning she was with God, creating and maybe even taking form of that Spirit that roamed over the waters. Before there was light. There was Wisdom, permeating what is here before even the light came into being.

Our spirits do that don’t they? They are sensed at all times, for sure, but during the distractions and the busy-ness of the day, they take a background to what’s happening with our lives. But as the light of day fades, the Spirit begins to take hold of us, reviewing long-ago events, drawing into our consciousness feelings and giving rise to memories of people, places, and things we thought we had forgotten long ago.

And it is here with his in mind that we enter our Gospel text, the one where the human Jesus is baptized by another human, John the Baptist. What are the images that we have around baptism? (accept all answers).

Good. Let’s talk theologically a little bit. Remember what that means? Helping us image what we hear so that we can better enter into the meaning of our own faith. Right? Imagining. Metaphor. Helping us transcend our own limits. So when we talk about water in the Bible, it’s a central theme and form that occurs across our biblical text. In our Genesis text, the water is there, as a basic building block of life. The heavens and planets are there too. So because we’re creatures of the land and not the sea, we are then introduced to our part. God doesn’t create at this point as much as give rise to formation of what we see. God is engaged in formation of what we see around us, maybe with the help of ancient geological forces and tectonic plates, but that form takes place to what we have around us today. And notice the water didn’t go away. Because without water, none of what we see would be. Water is needed not only for our bodies but for erosion of the soil, features of our landscape, growth of plants, and plenty of other things. So again: if we combine water images with baptism images, we might end up with something quite remarkable: water with purpose, water that gives qualities beyond what we realize. Water, in that sense, is Spirit, Wisdom from the beginning times. Water is good.

And so it comes as no surprise that we do not see Jesus taking a dust bath to get cleansed, like many animals do. We don’t see him go to a high moutaintop and just let the sand blast him clean. The very human Jesus has to be immersed in the good Spirit that has existed before time can measure. And it is only after that goodness is given, the Spirit descends, and that we see God’s response: remember what God says after Jesus gets dipped in the Jordan?
 “Here is my son, whom I love, with whom I am pleased”.

And then Jesus gets a big crowd of angels, the clouds part and he gets swept up into heaven, right? No? No.

The Spirit comes; the blessing is given; and Jesus is only then commissioned and ready for ministry in the world. Because he is not rewarded with a glowing golden throne by being dipped, filled, and blessed. In the very next thing we read about Jesus, that very pre-existent thing we call Wisdom at creation drives Jesus into the wilderness to do what? Hmm? To face his wild beasts, with angels attending him.

Why this matters for us is this: we are a tradition that baptizes children in infancy, and the reason for that is so that they can recover their legacy of formation with water, they can be filled with Spirit, they can receive the blessing of ministry and commission at a very, very young age because they will be entering into a world that has many dangers and pitfalls. We even have an expression here in America, don’t we, about our world’s wilderness: “It’s a *jungle* out there”.

We don’t choose that jungle image by accident. Jungles are unknown places. Covering up the light and can be dark, and that can be dangerous. A jungle metaphor is used to suggest dangerous environments in which predators thrive and the weak must look out for themselves. Think “concrete jungle” to describe the less safe parts of cities, or “blackboard jungle”—remember Glenn Ford in the inner city schools?

"It's a jungle out there" has two slightly different common uses. The first is as a warning, and it usually includes the suggestion that the individual must look out for himself. In the second use, the expression is used to justify ruthless, competitive behavior on the part of the speaker. "I had to think of my own interests first," someone might say. “It's a jungle out there." In this sense, the expression as the same meaning as the common saying "it's every man for himself."

That’s the challenge of baptism, and why we are told of the wilderness in the very next sentence. We are blessed by God, told we are loved, given the wisdom needed for our work in the world and then…we’re in the jungle from then on.

Look, on our better days, we are open, present, and can begin with a mind and heart focused on God. Most days we start there, and can even end there, but in between in our waking hours there is an hour-by-hour battle of needs that start to invade our lives. We encounter people and situations that snap us immediately into the question, “how will this affect ME?”, or “How does my self-image demand that I react to this?”. Maybe when we encounter someone who really challenges us and the way we want things to go we ask, in our minds, “How do we get back in control of this situation”?

All blessing and wisdom is gone when we forget that we are in the world to serve, and when our fragile egos start to ask the questions of the self rather than God’s questions. We become impatient, and while we celebrate our ability to draw conclusions that satisfy us, these can be blessings or curses.

And yet, these self-defenses that are our demons can be ministered to through the angels that serve us in our wilderness/world. We just have to be able to see them.

Just as they are for Jesus, they are there for us too. We must tame our wild beasts, we will never lose them. And we must use our angels to remind us of our goodness, while still using our self-defenses to delay bad decisions spiraling out of control until we can access our angels for another path that is so often hidden in the moment. That’s why when we answer, “I don’t know”, it can be the most powerful thing we can do. It delays our wild beasts to allow our angels to shine through.

I’ll leave you with this final thought.

It will take most of our lives to begin to see the angels or respond, “I don’t know” rather than, “but here’s what I think (which is another form of “here’s what I know about you”). We have to let the others-oriented angels start gazing back at the persons we encounter rather than our egotistic wild beasts. Our angels let us see the other, fully and truthfully, and in gazing at others with God’s own eyes, we move toward compassion and our lives lose the drive to be right each time.

We still need critical thinking. But done with love, we can move more deliberatively toward our baptism selves and response. Like all things God, it’s never an either-or. It’s a both-and. And for that grace given us,

Thanks be to God, Amen.