11and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.” 12The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan…(Mark 1:11-13, KJV)

Many a father could look back with regret and wish he had been so clear and so affectionate with his son. The son is heading off into this vast, glorious world, but a world, alas, that includes wilderness and temptation. And the wilderness with its temptations is not some patch of geography that can be avoided, but is a looming reality, inescapable. The child is bound eventually to end up there. Could any words of preparation be finer than these divine words from the Father to the Son:

“Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

With such words behind him, many a son could have been strengthened as he headed off into the desert. And with such words behind her, many a daughter could have been strengthened for the wilderness.

I wonder, for example: Did the father of the Prodigal Son speak such words when his son took his inheritance and headed out the door? The father had reason to be offended with his son, naturally, for it was unkind of the son to request his inheritance before the old man had even died. Who could have blamed the father if he had yelled after the son, “And don’t let the screen door hit you on the butt as you leave!” And besides his frustration, the father had reason to be alarmed for his son, for he might have sensed his son’s inclination to squander his substance in riotous living. Indeed, the old man might have thought back to his own youth and recognized about himself that that is probably what he would have done at that age: squandered his substance on riotous living. If so, the father had reason to be alarmed for his son as his son went out the door and headed toward yon horizon.

But for all that -- for all the father’s outrage and his alarm for his son -- did that old man also equip his son with such strong and tender words: “Thou are my beloved son; with thee I am well pleased.”

Sometimes I think that if someone in our life had said such a thing to us, it might have saved us from some poor choices in life.

Life is short. Let’s try not to have so many regrets. If you have not said to your child in a while, “You are my dear child; with you I am well pleased,” well, if we have not said it and meant it, then let’s try to do better. As long as the sun comes up, we have before us another day to try to do better.

St. Mark’s Gospel is spare, but perhaps even more powerful because of it. St. Mark does not speak of the nature of the wilderness temptations endured by Jesus. We learn the nature of those temptations from St. Matthew and St. Luke -- the temptation
to make bread from a stone, to win fame by way of a spectacular dive from the pinnacle of the Temple, and the temptation to gain all the glory and wealth of the world but to lose his own soul along the way. I bet St. Mark knew of those things, but he does not linger to preach them. Instead, he gives us a tight sequence of spiritual steps -- one that we ourselves might know all too well: Jesus is baptized and immediately launched into the desert to face temptation. But there is one more thing: between his emergence from the water of baptism and his desert temptations, there is this intervening and kind voice:

“Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

This is the heavenly resource with which Jesus entered into the wilderness and its temptations. He was equipped and strengthened by his memory of who he is: he is the beloved Son.

My dear old pastor, Pastor Raymond Shaheen, of blessed memory, certainly tried to equip me in life with his words of support and encouragement. Again and again, he would end his letters with words like these: “In a world where too few people make the effort to be all our Maker intended us to be, thank you for being who you are.” Maybe he wrote similar words to some of you, for he was a friend of this parish and I know he wrote to some of you.

In my files, I have a copy of a sermon in which Pastor Shaheen speaks of the strength that comes from remembering who we are in this world. His sermon includes this passage:

Some years back, on one of televisions’ better programs, there was a very fine performance of The Emigrants, a saga-of sorts of a [Swedish] family. The eldest, first born son that he was, had visions of life in the new world called America. The more he was enthralled by what the land across the waters could offer, the less he found appealing in the Old [Sweden] of his youth.

The time came when he broke the news to his aging father. Some fathers are gifted with a measure of understanding. This father was one of them, who braced himself for the day when he would see his son and his family for the last time.

The son and his family gathered together the limited possessions they would take with them -- a steamer trunk for the children’s things and likewise one for the parents, a suitcase for each to last the journey. These, the trunks and the suitcases, they load on the old cart.

They make their embraces on the stoop of the homestead where each of them had first seen the light of day. As they climb into the cart, they head for the lane that leads to the road to town; the first leg on their way to the seaport.
On either side of the lane that leads to the road that will take them to town are the surrounding meadows, rich in memories, of course.

Now comes a most poignant scene: above the creaking noise of the wheels of the cart, the old father cups his hands to his lips and calls: “Go slowly as you go through the gate.”

An eloquent summation, indeed, from the depth of his soul. Intended, of course, to be a fervent plea that in going slowly he would think in unforgettable fashion of the stock from which he had stemmed -- of the roots that constitute his heritage -- of the land whose soil was intertwined with his very soul -- of his father and mother who had taught him so much in the days of his childhood -- of his grand-parents whose lengthened shadow had always been cast benignly upon him -- whose lasting legacy could be the remembrance of that portion of God’s love which had come to him through them in his baptism and in his confirmation -- and all this from a place to which he would never return -- except as one day he might remember -- and in remembering, be made strong. (Pastor Raymond Shaheen)

Here is what I am thinking: Because of what Jesus has done in this world, you are his brother through baptism, you are his sister. And in remembering that, you will be strengthened for your journey.

There is a strong connection between your sense of self identity and how you actually bear up in this world. Your sense of who you are helps determine how you conduct yourself. Who was Jesus? He was the beloved Son! He knew it from all eternity, and at his Baptism, his heavenly Father affirmed it with clear and strong words. In remembering who he was, he was made strong.

It is the same with you: You are baptized, or you are preparing to be baptized (like dear Lori Burnett here, who is studying the Catechism with me), or you know that you are invited to be baptized. When you are baptized, it becomes with you as it was with Jesus long ago: Your baptism is the point in your life when God welcomes you into his family. You become - not only in name, but in reality - a “child of God.” And so, the congregation gladly welcomes each baptized person with these words:

We welcome you into the Lord’s family. We receive you as fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers with us in the kingdom of God.

A key, then, to the spiritual life is that we should remember our baptisms, remember who we are, and in remembering, to be made strong.

There are daily deeds we can do that will help sustain our identity as beloved children of God. Let me give you two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the teachings of Martin Luther.

First, from the Old Testament, we have the wonderful story of Daniel and three other children of Israel in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The three other children of Israel were named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. As the story goes, Daniel and the three children were selected to be raised in the king’s palace and
to learn the letters and the language of the Chaldeans. Furthermore, they were to be fed according to the ways of the palace, and not according to their Jewish ways:

5 The king assigned them a daily portion of the rich food which the king ate, and of the wine which he drank. (Daniel 1:5, RSV)

But Daniel remembered that he was an Israelite, not a Babylonian, and in remembering, he was made strong:

8 But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s rich food, or with the wine which he drank; therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. (Daniel 1:8, RSV)

Daniel’s request was granted to him, with the result that he and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were nourished not only on a Jewish diet, but on a Jewish self-identity. Their distinctive deeds of diet helped keep alive in them the notion that they were the children of the God of Israel. And they surely needed that identity later in life, for the three children of Israel had to face the fiery furnace and Daniel had to face the lions’ den — all of which they were able to do with wonderful integrity. Their self identity had been nourished by daily deeds.

Likewise it should be with us, according to Martin Luther. That is why in his Catechism, Luther teaches about morning prayer, evening prayer, and the sign of the cross. Luther would have parents and pastors teach this spiritual rhythm to the children and to the people:

In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, “In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Then you may say this prayer:

“I give Thee thanks, heavenly Father, through thy dear Son Jesus Christ, that Thou hast protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I beseech Thee to keep me this day, too, from all sin and evil, that in all my thoughts, words, and deeds I may please Thee. Into thy hands I commend my body and soul and all that is mine. Let thy holy angel have charge of me, that the wicked one may have no power over me. Amen.”

And then, at the close of the day, we are to repeat the steps: make the sign of the cross, call upon the name of our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, say the Creed or the Lord’s Prayer, and then a nighttime prayer commending ourselves into the hands of God for the night.

In this way, our day is framed by the Triune Name, the sign of the Cross, and prayer. It helps keeps keep alive in us who we are, for we are awesome folk! Why, we are even the very children of God and friends of Jesus.
Meanwhile, our God does the same thing. He never forgets his love for us. Morning by morning, he recalls that you and I are precious to him, and remembering that, he sets to work again to bring his Kingdom to this old earth.

We even have a record of his self-identification. Through the prophet Hosea, we are permitted a glance, a blessed glimpse into the inner convictions of our God. And so, in the Eleventh Chapter of Hosea, we read this inner dialogue of our God:

> My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it. [And yet] How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11:7-9, RSV)

In this morning’s Lenten story of Jesus heading out into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil, we see God determined to remain who he is: he is the sinless one, who is willing to weather this world’s temptations and this world’s sorrows if by some means he can save us.

And Lent asks you and me to be like him. Our salvation cost Jesus very much. Can it cost us so little that we do not even try to maintain our Christian identity and integrity?

The Apostle Paul writes this, reminding us of our identity and urging us to suffer with Christ:

> it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:16-17, RSV)

This week might be the wilderness week for you. You might get up from the pew this morning feeling happy and strong and venture out into this glorious city, only to suddenly find yourself assaulted by sin, suffering, and temptation. If so, you will be mirroring the fate of Jesus who rose from the waters of Baptism and soon found himself contending with the devil’s temptations. As he was strengthened for the wilderness by the memory that he is the beloved Son of God, so let you and me be strengthened too for this week ahead of us. We’ll take it a week at a time, then hasten back to Church and to fellowship with Jesus again, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.