It's amazing wonderful to look out at all of you. It's like looking at a seedbed of memory of the last 30 years of our life together, and it’s wonderful to see all of you. I'm deeply grateful to John for this invitation and for many kindnesses as well. And it's lovely for me to be with you as we all celebrate with joy the centennial year of St. Andrew’s Church to which I salute you for the kind of ministry that you continue to carry on in the name of the Lord in the City of Norfolk. I came up with an idea this morning. You know that John is the sixth rector of St. Andrew’s and his title could be John the Sixth. I think I like that better than he does.

I. So, where is life found? That’s the question that we ask ourselves on the first Sunday of Lent. You can come up with some immediate answers. Certainly the Delivery Room in the hospital is a good answer to that question -- as new life comes into the human family. If you sit a lot in Norfolk traffic, you look out of the window and see that the city is just bubbling with life of all kinds. And in Manhattan, where you can walk on the sidewalks and be embraced with the wide variety and rich fullness of the moving human community. Or you can open the pages of the newspaper and you can find all kinds of issues of life and issues of death. And all the rich dimensions of that question of where is life found.

The Gospel is all about life. Jesus says, “I came that they might have abundant life.” Abundant life. It’s not the list of things that you are or the money in your checking account. Lent is the renewal of the life that God offers us all the time.

Mark is the source of the reading that you just heard. It is the oldest and shortest of the four gospels, and that gospel begins with stark contrasts. The gospel opens with the preaching of John the Baptist and then comes Jesus’ time in the wilderness, and it is in that tension between those two initial events where his life and his meaning and his ministry are rooted.

Remember Advent? The great figure of Advent is John the Baptist – the first one off the mark in the gospel we hear today. Around him are crowds and crowds of people who have come out from Jerusalem to hear the prophetic herald, filled with the energy of God’s divine life. And it takes place at the Jordan River in the lush riff valley that runs north and south in Israel, fertile with crops, fertile with new life. Climaxed by God himself, speaking from the cloud: “This is my son, the beloved.” Listen to him.

A. So that’s Part A but then Part B is what we just heard read for Lent, the beginning. “Immediately after God’s voice comes from the cloud, the same spirit spoken from the cloud drove Jesus out into the wilderness. It is the spirit that binds both events together – the baptism and the temptation. Binds them together from the Jordan valley to the wilderness of Judea where he will be tempted by Satan with wild beasts and angels. The
wilderness is a place of soul struggle, a place without distraction where Jesus is tempted to move away from God.

Between those two poles are total opposites — the water and the place of no water — the crowds and Jesus alone — exterior reassurance and interior struggle -- promise and perplexity -- God and Satan. And out of the tension of all of those opposites springs the meaning and ministry of Jesus.

II. So the wilderness is the rich image we consider today. We think of wilderness usually as being a tangle of vines and trees, undergrowth and overgrowth. But when I walked in the Judean wilderness in 1991 during a whole morning, there wasn’t a tree or plant in sight. Mile after mile as far as you could see, rolling white ledges of limestone. The place of wild beasts and angels, all together.

John Bunyan in one of the great classical works of Christian devotion, called Pilgrims Progress, has as its opening sentence: “As I walked through the wilderness of this world.” An image captured in the 20th century by an English novelist Rose Macaulay in her book called The World My Wilderness. On the surface dealing with London after Blitz of the second world war, but on a deeper level, the world her wilderness and her soul’s journey back to faith after 30 years away. The world, the wilderness.

In the tension between those two events is the high ecstasy of Jesus’ baptism conjoined with the long task and his soul’s hunger. And the two places are heard in the sound of the Psalms where of “There is a river the streams make glad the city of God, the Holy place of the tabernacle of the most highest.” “A barren and dry land where no water is.” So where is life found? Life is found in the conjoining of the two, the river and the wilderness – fertility and sparsity – spiritual highs and spiritual lows. In the conjoining of the two, the high places of our life where we know and love God and the daily grind where we are landed by life on hard and stony ground where we are tempted to lose our way.

A. Our own baptism – the promise that we are God’s own beloved, promise of who we can be and can become in the life of grace.

B. Our daily life – where we live day after day – is often our own wilderness – the hard reality of our daily struggle to make good choices to be the best we can be while tempted to be less than our best. Our journey of faith always unfolds inside ourselves and our biggest obstacle is always ourselves. So, where do we find life – high, low, flush with life water, or dry and hard as stone.

For me, T.S. Eliot, the 20th century Anglo-American poet is John the Baptist of our time and he asks the very same question, “Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”
Sister Joan Chittister, a contemporary Roman Catholic writer, said that it’s “Not the questions of how to make a living but how to make a life.” Because we are meant by God to find life. We find God who gives life in the high places of our joy, but perhaps even more on the stony and barren ground where wild beasts lurk behind us.

So where do you find life?

In the 1990s, a young family started coming to this church. The father was a young Navy doctor stationed at the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth. They had one child, a little girl 3 years old. I enjoyed visiting the family – but I had the most fun sitting on the floor playing with their daughter. They badly wanted a second child. The mother was a devout Episcopalian; the father, a devout Roman Catholic. But they began coming to St. Andrew’s church all the time, every Sunday. They felt at home in this community of faith. Finally, they discovered that the mother was pregnant. One Sunday they both hugged me at the door, exuberantly and enthusiastically. But in September their small son was born with a badly defective heart – and he could live only if he could receive a heart transplant. From the delivery room, he was taken straight to the ICU at King’s Daughters Hospital where he lived day after day after day. The weeks of September unfolded and we talked constantly on the phone. And the parents told me with agonizing voices, “We don’t know how to pray because our baby’s life means another baby’s death.” Until finally, on a Tuesday at the end of September, the father called me and told me that the baby now was not strong enough to have surgery even if a heart became available. And on Friday, he told me though his tears that his young son would be relieved of life support. They wanted to bring him to this church for his baptism in this community, and so they asked, “Can you come on Friday morning and give him baptism?” All the parents came from Georgia – two devout Episcopalians and two devout Roman Catholics and in a stainless steel bowl used for all kinds of things at the hospital, holding the baby with wires and tubes, the sacrament of grace was given to him and I sat with his parents in a small room while their son died. The baby died on Friday. The day Jesus died. The next day all of them were in my study to plan the baby’s funeral mass – on Saturday: “the day Jesus lay dead in the grave.” On Sunday morning all of them filled up a pew at St. Andrew’s Church and the Roman Catholic parents for the first time came to the altar and received Christ in Holy Communion in this church. The feast of the resurrection in the midst of hearts that were broken. On Monday, the first day of a new world, we held the baby’s burial liturgy. They have long since moved from Norfolk and I have no idea where they might be, but my memory of them is clear and they are my teacher and my hero in faith.

III. Conclusion:

In the hard and stony places of our life where wild beasts lurk nearby, there are angels none the less and we are meant in the wilderness of this world to be sustained by baptismal grace because we are – and always will be God’s beloved children.

So where is life found?

This wilderness experience of Jesus is the invitation to move in the grace and strength of the baptized life into the space of things that terrorize us and make us afraid, things we can never
understand – places of emptiness, barren stones and wild beasts. There in those places in your life, you, too, are tempted to say “Where is God?” “Does God care?” “Where is God anywhere to be found?” Your temptation is to deny God’s power. But grace given you enables you to say with Jesus, with young parents, with whatever draws you away from God’s abundant life – to say “No.”

Where is life found?

Life is found in the wilderness of this world, where we are tempted to give up on God, where we are tempted to be less than we are – we none the less – in Lent and always – go bravely forward, built up together in faith and love to that Kingdom which hath foundation whose builder and maker is God.

So we live our life from day to day – always only in the present moment. In the high places of our joy and in the dark valley of our pain. We can discover again and again in the ministry of angels that the stones of the wilderness can be made food for the journey. And so on this first Sunday in the season of the shadow, I offer you these little thoughts of faith, hope and love in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.