

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“Trial and Temptations”

Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. [10] And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11] And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

[12] And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. [13] He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

[14] Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, [15] and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

CAST INTO THE WILDERNESS

In Mark's gospel, we know this truth from the very first verse. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and the Son of God. This is very good news.

And this news is soon confirmed. Jesus is baptized. The Spirit of God descends like a dove from heaven and lands on his shoulder. A voice from heaven proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

But, it isn't long before a shadow falls across this heavenly scene. The same Spirit that descended from the heavens like a dove now drives Jesus into the wilderness. Apparently this dove has talons. It leads Jesus where no one wants to go.

For those who are afflicted with the notion that our baptism exempts us from suffering and conflict, this passage is a powerful antidote. Baptism does not exempt us from entering the wilderness. Baptism prepares us for the wilderness.

The wilderness in Jesus' day was like Death Valley. It was thought to be the home of demons and wild animals. Why would the Spirit "immediately" (as Mark always puts it) drive Jesus into a place like this?

Mark wants us to know the truth from the very beginning. This is no ordinary Messiah. He comes to confront the mysterious dark powers of sin and death. And it will be a struggle from start to finish.

Jesus is not above the struggles of the human condition. He is not immune from temptation. Jesus faces trials and temptation from the very beginning. He was (as the writer of Hebrews put it) "tempted in every way as we are." (Hebrews 4:15)

And trials and temptations will be his constant companions all the way to the cross.

LENTEN WILDERNESS

This is the first Sunday of Lent that sober 40 days we spend with Jesus on the road to the Golgotha. In Lent the church encourages us to live for a while in the wilderness. We face the wild beasts. We confront our own personal demons and temptations. We once again place our lives under the shadow of the cross.

Why in the world would we want to do something like this? Why would we want to spend 40 long days in the wilderness? Isn't there enough bad news in our world as it is?

Maybe we ought to be like the folks at Universal Studios and just keep on celebrating Fat Tuesday until Easter. Why can't we just proclaim the Jesus who comes to bring us joy, peace and prosperity?

Well, actually, that Jesus never existed. Jesus does indeed bring us joy and peace, but that salvation always takes a cruciform shape. Struggle is always a necessary part of the story.

Mark wants us to know from the very beginning that the call of Jesus is not simple and easy. The same Spirit that calls Jesus also drives him into the wilderness. The Good News begins by openly confronting the demonic.

You see, God loved the world too much to leave things the way they were. And so God sent his Son to change things, and that led to temptation and conflict right away.

If God wanted to change a broken world back then, it just stands to reason that God wants to change our world today as well. God wants to confront those things in our life that are broken. God wants to forgive our sin and renew our lives.

God loves us too much to leave us where we are.

The season of Lent gives us an opportunity to start over again, to examine our lives in the bright light of the cross.

LENT AND THE BIBLE

Someone asked me this week if the season of Lent is mentioned in the Bible. It isn't.

Lent was developed much later by the church. But, I would add that the Lenten season is very biblical. Lent is a systematic way for us to think about and take personally what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The road to the cross is paved with the sins and shortcomings of human beings. But, please don't think that this story is just about the sins and shortcomings of Jews and Romans who lived long ago. That would be a serious misunderstanding of the Bible. The road to the cross is paved with our sins and shortcomings as well.

If it is true (as the Bible clearly teaches) that Christ died for our sins on the cross then it must also be true that in some way our sins led to that cross. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3)

That's why Lent is so necessary. Sin is serious business for everyone. We must take this journey every year in an attempt to understand how we have been driven into the wilderness by temptation. This journey helps us see what wild beasts crouching at our door ready to drag us down.

This journey also helps us remember that just as angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness we need the ministry of angels as well. We need spiritual help to make this long and difficult journey.

SIN IN OUR OWN LIFE

Do you say that there is no temptation in your life? Do you say that there are no wild beasts crouching at the door of your life? Do you say that you making it just fine on your own without the ministry of angels?

Then I would say, "Watch out! The devil has got you just where he wants you." C.S. Lewis put it this way, "It is the policy of the devil to persuade us that there is no devil." If you don't believe in the existence of evil you are either asleep or have your head in the sand.

But, if we believe in this personification of evil where should we look?

Scott Peck in his book, "People of the Lie" says that if we want to look for genuine evil, we should look first in the church. It is the nature of evil to "hide among the good." Satan masquerades as an angel of light.

This is what Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians. And since Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, it should not surprise us that "his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

Now this doesn't mean (as has so often been the case in the history of the church) that we say that our theological opponents are ministers of the devil. It does mean that those of us who are leaders in the church and who profess to be followers of Christ are in a particularly vulnerable position when it comes to temptation.

As God told Cain before he killed his brother Abel, sin is "crouching at the door." (Genesis 4:7) Sin is ready to jump us like a wild beast.

I know some people who insist on talking a lot about evil and temptation and the reality of the devil. But, they never talk about evil in relation to their own lives. They are always talking about the evil that is out there ... in someone else's life.

They are talking about the evil of their enemies, the evil of those whose theology is not orthodox and the evil of those who are not moral. They think it is their duty to "go to war" against the evil forces that they see arrayed against them and their world view.

But, what they are unable to see is the sin in their own life.

As Jesus once put it, we need to remove the log in our own eye before we attempt to remove the speck of sawdust from our neighbor's eye! (Matthew 7:3; Luke 6:41)

So many of us talk a lot about the devil and temptation, but we have no humility. We have no sense that we too are being terribly tempted by self-righteousness attitudes and a false sense of faith.

A RELIGIOUS DEVIL

Yes, I believe in the devil, and often the devil is very religious! Sometimes he even wears the robe of a minister! That's a frightening thought! But, it's true. Who received the harshest criticism in the New Testament? It was religious leaders who thought they had all the answers.

In looking up the references to Satan in the gospel of Mark it was interesting to note that Jesus referred to his own disciple, Peter as Satan. Peter was "Satanic" because he wanted the kingdom to come in his way, the way of victory and conquest. He wanted no part of a Savior who was on the road to the cross. (Mark 8:33)

It seems to me that there are many who are like Peter today. We want Jesus our way instead of his way. We want salvation without sacrifice, and a kingdom that comes through conquest and might.

If a congregation is overly satisfied with the way things are going, it might be a warning sign. We may be kidding ourselves about who we really are and what we really believe. We might be trusting in our own goodness instead of God's power, and that's always a dangerous temptation.

A minister told of a friend who was a respected economist. He was asked to serve on the board of a church organization that helped needy children. At first he was very inspired by the work that was done.

But, then he learned the salaries, the real salaries of some of the clergy staff. He also uncovered some accounting irregularities. After prayerful consideration he brought it to the attention of the directors ... and he was promptly dismissed from the board.

He later told a friend, "I think clergy, because they tell themselves that they are doing the work of the Lord, are particularly susceptible to self-deceit. If you're feeding hungry children, none of the moral rules apply to you that apply to mere mortals."

To paraphrase Mark Twain, "We are sometimes good men and women in the worst sense of the word."

We have been cast into the wilderness of temptation and sin, and we don't even know we are there until we are overcome by evil. Why do you think ministers and religious leaders sometimes do such shocking things? They didn't have enough respect for the power of temptation and sin. They didn't believe that they could do something like that, and then they did.

Don't make that mistake. Don't think that you are strong enough to avoid temptation. Temptation comes to old and young, rich and poor, strong and weak, and temptation comes especially to the person that takes faith seriously. Any of us can be cast into the wilderness of temptation at a moments notice.

And so we need Lent. Lent is a time when we can take the power of sin and temptation seriously. In Lent we can take the time to reflect soberly on our lives and ask for forgiveness. In Lent we choose once more to live under the shadow of the cross.

TEMPTATION AND FORGIVENESS

There is one big difference between the temptation of Jesus and our temptation. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are ... but he did not sin. He did not succumb to temptation. (Hebrews 4:15) We often sin, and that can be very discouraging.

But, according to the Bible our failure is not the end of the story. Jesus died for our sins. His body was broken for us. His blood was shed for us.

And that means we are forgiven and freed to live without fear. We can honestly face temptation because we know that Jesus stands with us in our time of need. He is our comforter, our friend and our guide. He ministers to us in our wilderness of temptation just as angels ministered to Jesus in his wilderness of temptation.

The wilderness is a desert, a dry place. But, the desert is also filled with the power of God's Spirit.

Notice that in Mark's gospel the angels of God minister to Jesus the whole time he is being tempted by Satan and threatened by the wild beasts. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is never portrayed as being completely alone in the wilderness. God's angels are always there.

In the same way, we are not left alone either. God is with us in the time of struggle. His ministering angels are never more obvious than those times when we are cast into the wilderness.

It is said that trials can either leave us bitter or better. That's true. Our time in the wilderness of temptation can be a time of preparation for greater service as it was for our Lord, or the wilderness can become our undoing.

The difference comes in what we believe.

If we believe deep down inside that we are indeed all alone in the wilderness, then I'm afraid that despair and temptation will finally gain the upper hand.

But, if we believe that God is with us, no matter how great the pain or tragedy and that God can use this difficult experience for a greater purpose, then we'll come through the wilderness experience a better person instead of a bitter person.

A LIFE GIVING STRUGGLE

A man confined to a bed because of a lingering illness had on his sunlit windowsill a cocoon of a beautiful species of butterfly. As nature took its course, the butterfly began to struggle to emerge from the cocoon.

But, it was a long, hard battle. As the hours went by, the struggling insect seemed to make almost no progress. Finally, the bed ridden man, thinking that the powers that be had erred, took a pair of scissors and snipped the opening larger.

The butterfly crawled out, but that's all it ever did ... crawl. You see, the pressure of the struggle was intended to push colorful, life-giving juices back into the wings, but the man in his misguided mercy prevented this.

Instead of flying on rainbow wings above the beautiful gardens, it was condemned to spend its brief life crawling in the dust.

In the same way maybe our struggles in the wilderness of temptation are necessary. Maybe through the struggle we learn to be what we were meant to be.

A seeker after truth came to a saint for guidance.

"Tell me, wise one, how did you become holy?"

"Two words."

"And what are they, please?"

"Right choices."

The seeker was fascinated.

"How does one learn to choose rightly?"

"One word."

"One word! May I have it, please?" the seeker asked.

"Growth."

The seeker was thrilled. "How does one grow?"

"Two words."

"What are they, pray tell?"

"Wrong choices."

There is much that we don't know and can't understand. Maybe there is a reason for our struggle in the wilderness. Maybe God's purpose in a time of testing is to help us grow. Maybe it is through our trials and temptations that we are given eternal life.

God knows what He is doing. In Jesus we learn that He is not above us as we struggle. He is with us in the struggle. He gives everything He has ... even His own Son, his very lifeblood for our sake.

It is hard to understand, this salvation that comes through the wilderness, but it is at the heart of what we believe.

The wilderness is not a pleasant place, and without a doubt we will be scarred by the wilderness experience.

But, then so was our Lord, and it is by his wounds that we are healed. It was through the hard experience of body broken and blood shed that salvation came into the world.

Today our Lord reminds us once again. He provides a supper in our wilderness. It is the Lord's Supper.

Once again he ministers to us with a gracious meal in our time of need.
Once again he tells us,

“This bread is my body broken for you.
The cup is my blood shed for you.”

In our wilderness let us eat and drink to the promise of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

Amen.