

TEMPTED OR TESTED?
Mark 1:9-15
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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The Gospel of Mathew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels. The word synoptic means “taking a common view.” It is generally believed Mark is the oldest gospel and was used by Matthew and Luke as an outline for their own which they both embellished with more information and conversations than Mark.

For instance the temptation story in Mark’s Gospel is only two verses.

And the Spirit immediately drove him (Jesus) into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

Both Matthew and Luke added details to these temptations through that tense running conversation between Jesus and Satan including the three temptations. “Turn these stones into bread; if you are the Son of God throw yourself down (from the pinnacle of the temple) and God will command his angels...to bear you up so that you won’t (even) dash your foot against a stone;” and finally “All this (the kingdoms of the world in their splendor) I will give you, if you bow down and worship me.”

Obviously Matthew and Luke wanted to fill in the blanks left by Mark so their readers would learn step by step how Jesus was being tempted away from becoming the Crucified Christ and instead take the easy way out by becoming the king everyone wanted, a second King David who would rise up and replace Rome with Jerusalem as the new capital of the world.

But for some reason Mark ignored Jesus’ three great temptations in favor of an editorial decision. Apparently all Mark thinks we need to know is that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days with the wild beasts tempted by Satan as God’s angels waited on him.

So why was Mark so miserly with his words? Probably because he expects us to use our God-given imaginations to fill in the blanks. It wasn’t his intention to just tell the story by spoon feeding us the information on a silver platter. Instead I think Mark wants us to work for it by using our imagination as we work our way into the story as the Spirit leads us.

Here’s what I mean. Mark gives us a few key phrases to ponder. First we’re told the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Second, he was in the wilderness for forty

days. Third, all this time he was being tempted by Satan. Fourth, all this time he was living with the wild beasts but he was also being supported by God's angels.

Having given us these four bits of information Mark then invites us to bring into Jesus' story our own experiences with temptation during our own wilderness seasons in life. Why? Maybe so we can realize God stays with us during our temptations so we can learn how to overcome temptation.

First we are told the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. That sounds mighty foreboding doesn't it? Why would the Holy Spirit drive Jesus into the wilderness in the first place? We find a clue in the preceding passage:

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

At his baptism Jesus was given a powerful affirmation. He caught a glimpse of heaven's glory, he saw the Holy Spirit descending upon him. He heard the voice of God calling him the "beloved with whom God is well pleased." Who could ask for anything more?

"Who could ask for anything more?" If that happened to me, I'd think, "God must be very pleased with me just the way I am. Obviously I'm practically perfect in every way."

Being human maybe Jesus was tempted to think the same thing. On the other hand maybe Jesus was frightened by this affirmation from above because he knew sooner than later much more would be expected of him, more than he thought he could ever possibly give.

That's why the Spirit drove Jesus away into the wilderness to be stripped bare of everything he counted on, like the support of his family and friends in order to be tested almost beyond endurance so he could learn how to depend only on his Father in heaven. Then and only then would he be prepared for the great ordeal ahead, his offering up of himself on the cross.

Do you think one of the reasons Mark doesn't spell out for us Jesus' temptations and his inner struggles is because he wants us to be stripped bare of everything and only depend on God whenever we are being tested? If that thought unnerves you, consider this, even before we follow Jesus into the wilderness you've already been told, "You are my beloved and in you I am well pleased." Why is God pleased with you? Because God is good and God wants you to be good. That's why the Spirit drives us into our own wilderness from time to time. The question is will we go?

If we do choose to go, expect to be there for forty days. Forty days. That means as long as it takes.

We read in the Book of Exodus it took the Jews forty years to shed their slave mentalities and take on their new identities as God's Chosen People before they could enter the Promised Land. Why so long? Because they were stubborn. They didn't want to give up the old habits learned when they were in bondage in Egypt. Remember how they yearned for the Golden Calves they left behind? Materialism, egotistical thinking and the expectation to be at the center of the universe, these are the things that need to be purged when we go into the wilderness to face down Satan's temptations and simultaneously being tested by God.

There is a big difference between being tempted by Satan and being tested by God. The word Satan comes from the Hebrew word adversary. In the Christian scriptures Satan is sometimes called "the great liar." He is also sometimes called Beelzebub meaning "the Lord of the Flies."

You get the picture. Satan is everything God is not. God creates, Satan destroys. God is truth, Satan is the big lie. God desires to inform us, Satan is driven to deceive us.

You know what it's like to be tempted. Out of nowhere you have the need to act out something you shouldn't do or want something you shouldn't have. It's a feeling of self-entitlement, you want it and you want it so badly your ethics and self-worth suddenly mean nothing to you. You don't look ahead to the consequences, how you'll hurt yourself or someone you love because of your immediate cravings and simmering resentments. All you want is gratification and you want it now.

Hopefully, if you give in, your desire of instant gratification is replaced by remorse. Now remorse is a good thing because it means you still have a conscience. It's when you don't feel remorse, that's when it really gets problematic because that's when it's a symptom of losing your humanity. But even then there's hope. You can still have that Prodigal Son moment when you hit bottom, come to that place of repentance and go home to your waiting Father.

On the other hand being tested by God is a good thing. Why? Because God doesn't want to show you how weak you are instead God wants to show you how strong you can be. Then and only then are you prepared to face your temptations with faith and grace. Remember even when Jesus was getting bombarded with temptation, God's angels were with him the whole time. Maybe there's something to be said for those old Warner Brothers cartoons when Daffy Duck had a devil sitting on one shoulder and an angel on the other with both of them encouraging him to go their way.

Of course, you already know that whether you're being tempted or tested because either way there's a mounting tension you're under and that takes a toll on you

until you decide what you're going to do. That's precisely why Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness on the eve of his ministry but also his last temptation near the end in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And what about those wild beasts Mark mentioned, what are we to make of them? At first I thought their presence added to the despair and negativity of the scene; Jesus in the wilderness, fending off lions, tigers and bears. But then I read in one of the commentaries on this passage an interesting thought: Jesus being with the beasts suggests that time in the future when the lion will lie down with the lamb, symbolic of the peaceable kingdom waiting to restore our broken world. What did Jesus say? "The Kingdom of God has come near."

So the next time you find yourself facing another time of temptation it would be helpful to remember you are also facing a time of testing so remember Jesus and then call out his name so you can be empowered not to give in to sin but to give into Christ who lives in and through us to love and serve Christ so we can then love and serve one another.

One more thing to consider: According to Mark Jesus' temptations in the wilderness is actually a bridge or an in between time separating his calling and the beginning of his ministry. Come to think of it, our times of temptation and testing are also the bridge between our baptisms and the new beginnings of our discipleship.

Immediately after Jesus' time in the wilderness was over we read this:

"Now after John was arrested Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news.'" (Mark 1:14-15)

Battle tested and now ready to go, Jesus charged out of the wilderness and into Galilee. Likewise, after being battle tested we are empowered to charge out from our own wilderness and into our own Galilee to make the same proclamation through our witness and good works.

"The time is fulfilled," Jesus said, "the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news."

Maybe that's why God allows us to be tempted, so we can be tested, we can be shown how strong we can be before going out to bring Christ's Gospel to our neighbors in our neighborhoods.

You've heard about the New Beginnings process we are gearing up for. Its purpose is to help us self-evaluate where we are now as a congregation and where we should be going, as a congregation. You might even say going through New Beginnings is like going through the wilderness. It's meant to be a time of testing, testing our

commitment, testing our resolve, testing our desire to find out how God wants us to reach out to our neighbors to serve them, to minister to them, to bring Christ's love to them. I believe God wants to test us, not to show us how weak we are but to show us how strong we are now and how much stronger we can be as disciples, gathered together in this place for a sacred purpose.

Lent is a good time to prayerfully prepare for this time in the wilderness so that by Easter we will be energized to enter into Spirit-led holy conversations about where we have been as a congregation, where we are now and where God wants us to go.

Think of New Beginnings as a new bridge.