

Preparing For the Test  
Mark 1:9-15  
February 21, 2021  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Let us Pray - Lord God, Creator and Maker of us all, speak in the calming of our minds and in the longings of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent – a forty day period of preparation leading up to Easter. It is the tradition of the Church that this time of year is observed as a period of reflection, prayer, repentance and self-denial.

The reading for this first Sunday in the Lenten season is the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. Now as you know if you have been following the lessons from Mark for the past few weeks, Mark gives us scant details regarding the activities of Jesus. Mark is straight to the point – truly a man of few words.

But if we were to turn to Matthew or Luke’s Gospel account of the same story, we would get far more information. For example, we would learn that Jesus was hungry, to which Satan replied, “Then turn those stones into bread.” Next Jesus was taken to the top of the temple in Jerusalem. The tempter said, “Throw yourself down, and let the angels catch you.” Then Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the earth, and Satan said, “All this can be yours if you will just fall down and worship me.”

In other words, the evil one was tempting Jesus by saying, “Use your power to your own benefit.” “Use your power to make people believe.” “There is a way to be the Messiah that does not involve the cross,” Satan was suggesting, which surely was a great temptation in itself. Ultimately, one might infer that Satan was telling Jesus to save himself, rather than relying on God.

It’s interesting to notice that in the original Greek language, the word for Satan is *diablos* -- the same root from which we get the word, “diabolical” and “adversary.” Satan is surely the diabolical one. When you look at these temptations, I think you can see why.

What Mark does tell us is that after Jesus was baptized by John, the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness. The wilderness in Jesus’ day was a desert. Traditionally, the desert was the home of demons and evil spirits, and therefore would be the place with the greatest challenge to survive. If Jesus could overcome the temptations in the desert, he would be more than ready for his public ministry. As the saying goes, “What doesn’t kill you makes you strong.”

Now if we do not read the text closely, we may conclude that Satan – the tempter – led Jesus into the wilderness. But it was actually the *Spirit* that led Jesus into the wilderness. Not only that – it was an *abrupt* entry into the wilderness.

Again, in the original language, the indication is that the Spirit “thrust” Jesus into the wilderness. It carries a very forceful connotation that is missed if you simply read that Jesus was “led” into the wilderness.

The other thing to note about language this morning concerns the word “tempt.” The word for “tempt” is written as a present participle. Those of you who remember your high school English may recall that a present participle implies present, continuous, action. I only know that because I used to help my younger son Josh with his English assignments!

So Satan was constantly and continuously tempting Jesus in the desert for 40 days. Jesus never had a break. It makes you tired and weary just to hear what Jesus went through. This was all in preparation for his public ministry.

We may think of temptation today primarily in terms of breaching moral and ethical principles -- “The devil made me do it!” type of thinking. But “to tempt” originally meant in the biblical sense “to make an experience of, to pierce or search into,” such as one would do during a thorough examination. That makes more sense than having God “tempt” his own Son. The language conveys the idea that God is preparing Jesus and testing him so that he might be ready to pass the test. Think of it as a final exam for Jesus. God was preparing Jesus for his ministry and for the *ultimate* test, knowing it would come later when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion.

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We are all being “tested” in one way or another. Perhaps you have already had many tests in your life. Maybe you’re in the midst of one right now. Thousands and thousands of people are being “tested” for covid daily. It is a different sort of test, but can be a wilderness of its own.

Hundreds of thousands found themselves thrust into the wilderness when they contracted covid, and have suffered endless days and nights, and far too many have died. For others, the recovery has been long with no end in sight.

Families find themselves in the wilderness as they mourn the loss of a loved one. Hospital workers find themselves in a wilderness when they are pushed beyond the breaking point, and sometimes do not have enough resources to do their job safely.

Others find themselves in the wilderness after they lost their job; or were not able to put enough food on the table, or were facing eviction, or high school students trying to attend classes remotely, and it is an uphill climb. It's a wilderness out there.

Sometimes the wilderness also creeps inside the soul, and there is darkness where formerly there was light. I don't know all the answers, but I do believe the first step is to pray. That's what Jesus would have us do. Pray for God's strength, but also pray that you can discern the God-given wisdom and gifts that you may already have. In any case, when you're in the wilderness, pray. It was important enough for Jesus, and is important for us too.

Maybe you feel like you are spending a lot of time in the wilderness lately. We have seen so much of our country and our lives shut down over the last year, including our church. The social isolation is becoming more difficult for many, sometimes causing depression and despair. If you find yourself in any of those scenarios, you are not alone. You will also find yourself in the company of Jesus wherever you go. Spiritual resources will be yours.

There are other times we find ourselves in the wilderness. Maybe your test has come in the form of another crisis unrelated to covid – such as a major life change, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the darkness of depression. We live in a world where material things and creature comforts do little to prepare us for the wilderness experience and the “tests” of life that we will encounter. That's where your spirituality during the season of Lent can help.

Even Jesus did not rush head long into his ministry in Galilee, important as it was – rather he prepared himself by spending forty days and nights in the desert in order to understand how God would use him in his earthly ministry. Eventually, his spirituality caused there to be less of him, and more of God. When he emptied himself, he became filled with God.

In the same way, give yourself some time to understand how God can use you. Take time to comprehend God's plan for your life. You can do it through prayer, meditation, journaling, or with a few good friends or family members. It is time well spent to discern your gifts.

The desert wilderness can bring gifts of its own as Jesus found out -- gifts such as perseverance, fortitude, and faith. Sometimes we are in such a hurry to get on with our lives, our jobs and careers that we forget the most important step of all – the time to prepare and be ready to pass the test, whatever it may be. Just go back and read the Sermon on the Mount, and you will get a good idea of the gifts and values God wants to instill in you, just as Jesus did. The same spiritual guidance is available for you and me today. Lent is a good time to start.

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In summary, these are tough times. There are more than enough wilderness experiences to go around, but you are not alone. Just like Jesus, many are finding themselves thrust unexpectedly into the wilderness, whether it's because of the pandemic with its physical and social isolation, or some other life changing situations they are experiencing.

There are many tests, and some people feel like they have been stretched nearly to the breaking point. Surely there were times when Jesus felt all the things we feel and more. At times he might have been tempted to take the easy way out, or settle for less than God intended. The essence of temptation is to make us believe ultimately that we can live apart from God, and be better off for it. Jesus time spent in solitude and alone with God helped him prevail, and can help you too.

As we begin this season of Lent, let us take time to pray for our church family. There has been sorrow and grief among our own friends and families over the last couple weeks. We remember our dear Chris and Richard and their families. I know most of you receive the prayer chain. We are above all else a people who have learned to pray. It is in our DNA as a church, and our first line of defense when times get tough is to pray. I frequently encounter people who are grateful for your prayers and acts of kindness. Sometimes it is a meal, a card, or a phone call. They have made a difference. It's a wilderness out there, but you are not alone. God will sustain you and give you strength.

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I would like to end with a poem attributed to a soldier dating back to the civil war. It describes what God can accomplish through our wilderness experiences and times of testing, and it points to what we should really be praying for. Perhaps you have heard it. The soldier writes:

*I asked God for strength that I might achieve -  
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health that I might do greater things -  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches that I might be happy -  
I was given poverty that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power that I might have the praise of all -  
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for - but everything I needed.*

*Almost in spite of myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.*

*I am among all people, most richly blessed.*

May you also be richly blessed throughout this Lenten season.

You may be in the wilderness, but you are never alone. Amen

### Mark 1:9-15

1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

1:10 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.

1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

1:12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

1:13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

1:15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."