

Resisting Temptation in the Wilderness

Mark's telling of Jesus's baptism, time in the wilderness and ministry launch is incredibly lean, racing from one event to the next with nary an adjective to spare. Jesus comes from Nazareth to be baptized by John. The heavens are torn apart, the Holy Spirit descends, and the Father declares his delight in his Son. The instant Jesus comes up out of the water, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness for an epic contest with the Adversary. Next thing we know, John the Baptist has been arrested and Jesus is striding around Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. All of that happens in the course of just six sentences. We hardly have time to catch our breath, much less to make sense of it all. So, let's slow things down and try to discern first, how Jesus's baptism and time in the wilderness set the stage for his ministry and, second, what Mark's quick sequence of events might teach us on this first Sunday in Lent.

Six weeks ago, we saw that the tearing of the heavens at Jesus's baptism prefigures the tearing of the Temple veil after his crucifixion, ripping away the protective barrier that keeps us a comfortable distance from the Divine. Just as the disciples were terrified by Jesus's transfiguration last week, we tend to get frightened when God comes too close. Today's reading suggests that we might have reason to fear. The Holy Spirit may descend on Jesus as a dove, but that gentle little bird immediately drives him into the wilderness where the Adversary is waiting. Jesus spends forty days there, being "tempted" by Satan. That's the way our translation of Scripture tells it, anyway, but the original Greek is more nuanced and interesting.

All three of the Synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew, and Luke – describe Jesus's encounter with the Adversary in the wilderness. The Biblical Greek word they use, *peirasmos* (πειρασμός), can mean "temptation." But it can also mean "test" or "trial." Matthew and Luke use it in the first sense, describing Satan's efforts to tempt Jesus. But Bible Scholar Lamar

Williamson Jr. argues that Mark uses *peirasmos* in the sense of putting someone through a test or trial to see what he can do. That may explain why the Spirit is so insistent about sending Jesus into the wilderness. As Williamson observes, it's as though the Holy Spirit is spoiling for a fight with evil and tests Jesus to see how well he will serve as God's champion in the combat.

The Spirit's choice of the wilderness as the battleground for Jesus's encounter with the Adversary is significant. Mark and his contemporaries would have understood the wilderness, *midbar* (מִדְבָּר) in Hebrew, to be a dangerous place. A solitary traveler in the *midbar* could die of thirst or starvation or be devoured by wild animals. However, the Hebrew people had a long history of spiritual encounters there. After leaving Egypt, they wandered forty years in the wilderness, utterly dependent on Adonai for their survival. Both Abraham and Moses first heard the voice of God in the wilderness. Hagar and Isaac were saved by an angel in the wilderness when Abraham sent them away. Elijah was fed by an angel in the wilderness before traveling to Mount Horeb for his meeting with Adonai. Jesus would have known those stories, so he would have understood the wilderness not only as a place of many terrors, but as a place to find God.

Mark doesn't tell us what temptations Satan spreads before Jesus, but Matthew and Luke do. We know the creature tries to talk Jesus into abusing his divine power by turning stone to bread or jumping off the Temple to make the angels catch him. It tries to seduce him with worldly power. Those things might tantalize an entirely human opponent, but I can't imagine they appeal all that much to the Son of God, embodied or not. Maybe the creature wants to see if Jesus's human form weakens his godly nature, making him vulnerable to such petty temptations. Or maybe those petty temptations are the only weapons it has. They were effective enough on the likes of Adam, David, and Solomon – why don't they work on Jesus? Satan keeps at it for forty long days, wheedling and needling Jesus until the idea of death by starvation or wild beast

attack starts to sound like a welcome relief. A lesser soul, like one of us, might well have yielded to one of Satan's offers just to get it to go away.

We know that Jesus triumphs over the Adversary. With the help of Adonai's angels, he survives his time in the wilderness and returns to take up the battle that matters, the battle to save humankind. Satan still has a chokehold on the rulers of the world; John the Baptist might have lived to a ripe old age if not. But just as Jesus won his battle with Satan in the wilderness, he wins the battle to free humanity from evil's scaly grasp.

This passage reminds me of so many popular legends. Whether it's Lancelot or Luke Skywalker, the young warrior is anointed, then goes out to fight the dragon and rescue the people. It's a reminder that Jesus isn't only a wise teacher and miracle worker, important as those aspects of him are. He's also our champion, sacrificing himself to bring us to God as he shows us how to live with greater love for the Father, ourselves, and each other. And his time in the wilderness offers us priceless guidance on how to go through Lent.

Humanity has spread out across so much of the world that there isn't much physical wilderness left. Most of us in church today can visit the "great outdoors" in perfect safety and grab dinner on the way home. Our modern wilderness experiences are emotional, psychological, and spiritual, those dry seasons where gloom descends and hope is hard to find. Nonetheless, we still tend to think of temptation as sins of the body. That's why people give up alcohol, coffee, or chocolate for Lent. There's nothing wrong with offering a token sacrifice to show God that you're making an effort, but God probably doesn't mind very much if you eat a piece of candy or have a beer while you watch the Super Bowl. Enticements like liquor, tobacco, and sweets are most readily available in community life; we might call them societal temptations. Overindulging in them can make you sick and distract you from the love of God and others,

which isn't good. But the more dangerous temptations are those that lurk in the wilderness of our private selves. Pride, anger, envy, hatred, deceit, avarice, and despair dwell in the wilderness, pouncing on our souls the way wild beasts used to pounce on our bodies. Those temptations will make you absolutely miserable if they take root in your heart and mind, and they're hardest to fight when you try to engage them alone.

Satan doesn't seem to have figured out that it has already been defeated. The creature remains eager to poison us with temptations and drive us into the wilderness of despair. We all find ourselves in the wilderness from time to time because the Kingdom of God has come near to us but hasn't yet fully arrived. But Jesus reminds us that we needn't go into the wilderness alone. Instead of worrying about societal temptations, we can ask him to help us with the spiritual temptations that corrupt our hearts and separate us from God and one another. With Jesus as our champion, we can give up gossip, grudges, and disdain for our neighbors. We can vanquish cynicism and negativity. It isn't easy. Satan is nothing if not persistent, and it has plenty of people hypnotized into believing that hope is lost and the worst is on its way. Their voices can be loud and unrelenting, but we don't have to listen to them. Resisting temptation sometimes means insisting that God is good and life is a gift despite whatever false evidence the Adversary presents to confuse and discourage us. Sometimes, faith and defiance have to go hand in hand.

As Jesus reminds us in John's Gospel, the Adversary is a liar. Standing firm against its lies can be a lot harder than giving up chocolate, but it's much more important for our spiritual well-being. The battle isn't ours anyway. Our champion has already beaten Satan, he'll do it again as often as necessary, and the Kingdom of Heaven draws nearer all the time. We just have to resist the temptation to believe otherwise. Jesus protects us from temptation in the wilderness because he loves us. May we always trust in his power to bring us safely home. *Amen.*