

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 1, 2009 First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15

Lent 1

Loved, Tempted and Tested

You know when you have a video tape (not a DVD) and you are forwarding through it to find a certain part – and it's going in super fast mode, where you can see things happening, but you don't really have time to take it all in?

Well, that's what this passage in Mark is like. It's like Jesus' is on fast forward and we don't have the luxury of really seeing what's going on. This is typical of Mark – as we go through the year, notice how many times he starts a section with the word “immediately.”

In six short verses he makes three major moves. Very few details, just the basics. So we'll slow the tape down and hit pause on each of these to see what they have to say to us as we begin Lent and our journey to the cross with Jesus.

First Scene: Baptism

We just looked at this passage just a few weeks ago, right after Christmas. Because we pretty much have no information on Jesus' growing up years, when we follow the plot of his life in the Bible, we go very quickly from his birth, the family running to safety in Egypt, one story of him when he was 12 or so and then his baptism when he was about 30.

In these two brief verses about his baptism, three things happen:

Heaven is torn open

The Holy Spirit descends (like a dove)

God speaks: this is my son whom I love

In these three actions we see God's power, God's presence, and God's blessing – all of which are offered to us in our baptisms and our life as believers.

For the earliest Christians who would be hearing these words, to hear that heaven was “torn open” would take them in their minds to Jesus' death, when the curtain in the temple was torn in two. Interesting – that baptism and death are linked and in the other gospels.

Or not... because in baptism, the chief analogy for the water is not the water that washes, but the flood that drowns and the ark that saves. In baptism, we “die to sin” and “rise to life” – baptism is a death and resurrection.

And while Jesus' baptism is NOT literally the same as our baptisms 2000 years later, still the themes are there:

We are given God's power, God's presence and His blessing.
The ultimate bestowing of his love on his children.

In baptism we know that we are loved, not just by our parents, godparents and the congregation that gathers, but we are loved by God – and that's an identity that can never be taken from us. After Jesus' baptism, we get **Scene 2**: Jesus is "immediately driven by the same Spirit" into the wilderness. God sends Jesus out – to where he is tempted by Satan.

And all we know of his time in the wilderness is again three things:

he is tempted by Satan
he was with the wild beasts
and the angels waited upon him. The word for waited upon or ministered to is actually *diakone* – Deacon!

The other versions of this story in Matthew and Luke, have lots of details of what happened in the wilderness – the actual temptations and conversation with Satan. But here in Mark, we get nothing.

Perhaps the wild beasts were threatening and that's why the angels were with him. Perhaps this wilderness time was Jesus' first opportunity to bring about the peace that Isaiah spoke of where lion and cobras and lambs and scorpions live together. We don't know. And perhaps it doesn't matter.

Someone once said to me – "when you're reading the Bible, don't worry about what's NOT in the story – what the writer said is what he wants you to know."

And Mark wants us to know that Jesus goes to the wild places and the angels are with him. Jesus goes to the chaos places, where temptations lurk – then AND now – in the literal wilderness 2,000 years ago, and in our lives as well.

And that is good news – especially as we begin the season of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we gathered in the hall downstairs to begin these weeks mindful of our mortality, our shortcomings, to be honest with ourselves in confession before God.

In a way we acknowledged the wild places in our lives where we need Jesus and the angels to minister to us.

Because the temptations we face are real and subtle, and not so easy to spot. Temptation doesn't walk up to us and say, "Hi, I am Satan, and I'm here to tempt you." The tempter often looks and sounds like a friend or a relative.

For example: Remember the "just say no to drugs" campaign in the 80's and 90's? I appreciate it's direct and unambiguous message. But when a teenager is presented with a joint it's most likely to be from the hand of the friend. And while it's easy to say no to drugs, it is not easy to

say no to a friend, which is really what we're asking kids to do when we ask them to stay away from drugs and alcohol.

That's the way Satan works. Think about the deceptively sneaky ways that you are tempted away from your identity as a beloved child of God.

God will never tempt us like that – temptation is always the work of Satan. The good news is that even the wild place of temptation does not stand a chance with Jesus. Remember, the same spirit that baptized him sent him there and the angels are with him as well.

And while God will never tempt us, he will in **Scene 3** of our lesson, test us.

The difference between being tempted and tested is important.

Satan tempts – God tests

A temptation has evil intentions or outcomes

Being tested always results in a positive outcome or a good purpose.

Temptation is being invited to do wrong; it appeals to the worst part in us.

A test appeals to the best part in us, to reveal the best in our character.

Our temptor wants to bring us down.

The one who tests us wants us to succeed and be raised up

And so, it seems that as quickly as Jesus was sent to the wilderness to be tempted, he turns – actually RETURNS – to Galilee and the testing begins.

Only now, after receiving God's love (power and presence) in baptism, after being sustained in the wilderness, does Jesus publicly begin his ministry with the words,

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe the good news.

Repent and believe the good news – with these words we are certainly tested.

Although I fear they have become cliché churchy words that don't really mean much to us. Again, I think of Ash Wednesday and its emphasis on our mortality, our humanity, our need to face the dark side of our humanity.

Because it's not until we really go to where its darkest that we will be compelled to turn toward the light. That's what repent means. It doesn't just mean to turn away, or to turn around – it means to Return – to turn back. Which assumes that we've got somewhere to go back to.

And we do!!! The Good News of the Gospel – where we began this morning – loved and beloved in the water and Holy Spirit of baptism – our identity as children of God, as followers of Christ.

And this is a test – because following Christ leads to only one place – a cross. It costs Jesus his life. And this journey costs us as well.

Our priorities may need to change.

We may lose a relationship or two along the way.

Our attitudes will be readjusted.
It will even cost us money as our understanding of generosity expands.

This is what following Jesus is all about. This is what Lent is all about.

In some traditions, on Ash Wednesday, when placing the ashes on peoples' foreheads, the pastor says, "Repent and believe the gospel."

Refocus and trust the good news is another way of saying it.

I'll end with a poem that may be familiar to some of you. It is "The Testimony of a Confederate Soldier" from Civil War times.

It describes what God can accomplish in us through our wilderness experiences, through our times of testing.

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 men.
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 had hoped for.
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men, most richly blessed.

As are we: loved, tempted and tested – blessed!

Amen.