

February 21st, 2021

Mark 1:9-15 “Facing Our Demons”

Wednesday was the beginning of the forty day journey known as Lent or Lenten Season. As we’ve learned in Bible Study, 40 is a reoccurring number in the Scriptures, especially as a measure of time. Last summer we learned how the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after they were delivered from Egypt. This past couple of months we learned that Goliath taunted the Israelites for 40 days to find a champion to fight him. The first three kings of Israel – Saul, David and Solomon each ruled 40 years. Elijah went 40 days without food or water on Mt. Horeb. Most of the time, 40 is the number used to describe a time of testing or temptation. This week we’re reading about Jesus’ 40 days of testing and temptation in the wilderness, at least according the Gospel of Mark.

Not surprisingly, Mark’s version of the story is the shortest of the three gospels. Matthew’s version is 11 verses long. Luke’s version is 13. Then there’s old “get to the point and move along Mark” who gives us three verses. I had to throw Jesus’ baptism just to give Mary something more to read than three verses. Matthew and Luke give us some very specific accounts of what went on between Jesus and the Satan. Mark just says that “the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert and he remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan.” End of story. But as I said last month, even though Mark’s gospel is so short and sweet, he likes to make “scripture sandwiches” that require the reader to look at the bigger picture of the whole gospel.

Mark doesn’t describe the specific nature of Jesus’ temptation. But the word he uses that we translate as “temptation” is important because it’s used only 4 times in his gospel and only by the devoutly religious Pharisees when they ask Jesus trick questions to try to catch him contradicting the law. Or their *interpretation* of the law would be a better way to put it. A few weeks ago, we mentioned how, according to Mark, every time Jesus encounters a demonic spirit, it happens in a

“holy place” or a place of worship. So using this word “temptation” gives us a link between what Satan is doing and what the religious leaders try to do to Jesus. Both are putting him to the test and trying to derail him. And so the challenge or the test for Jesus is to stay the course, to hold his line, to refuse to be lured into embracing some other way than the way of the gospel.

Ever notice how a lot of times, temptation is subtle? That voice of temptation rarely come out and suggests that we should do something obviously evil. Instead, the voices appeal to the ends we are wanting to achieve and they suggest an alternative strategy on how to get there. After all, the ends justify the means don't they? People quote this phrase like a Bible verse. “The end justifies the means.” But Jesus says the opposite is true! So when you embrace that sneaky temptation that the end justifies the means, you fail the test. One of *our* challenges this Lenten season is to face up to our demons. To confront our weaknesses. To challenge our temptations. To face them down, hold the line with Jesus and refuse to compromise on the means by justifying the purity of the ends. This is where we learn to identify the things that seek to derail us. It's time to name the powers that influence our behavior.

Jesus was a charismatic natural leader with a huge mission in front of him. The temptations he faced in his 40 day wilderness experience were to exploit his power and gifts. Satan was trying to influence Jesus to attract attention to himself, eliminate his enemies, and impose his will on the world by force. I don't know about you, but those aren't the kind of temptations I face every day. At least not on the scale that Jesus did. Not all of us face the same temptations as charismatic natural leaders. Are we tempted to draw attention to ourselves? I *guess* we're capable of that at some level. Eliminate our enemies? Well, maybe not *eliminate*, but we sure can be passive aggressive towards them and try to make them miserable. Impose our will on the rest of the world? Well, okay but not for the purpose of world domination. I think the lesson we're supposed to learn from Jesus is to face our temptations intentionally so that we can face *any* challenge at *any* level boldly and purposefully.

Here's another thing to notice about this passage. Mark says that it was the Holy Spirit who drove Jesus into the desert to face his forty day test. The idea here is that Jesus had to prove to himself that he had what it takes to set out on his journey of ministry. I believe that *our* annual Lenten journey invites us see what *we're* made of. And so the best Lenten disciplines are those personalized ones that you design for yourself, maybe in consultation with a mentor or a spiritual director who know you well enough to challenge you in those areas where you're most vulnerable - To challenge those things that would keep you from being all you were created to be, so that you might drive them back and emerge from the wilderness, probably not altogether free of them, but knowing that you've got what it takes to hold the line whenever they launch another attack.

In this story, we see Jesus emerge from the desert and begin travelling around Galilee preaching the good news that the kingdom of God had come within reach and that it was time for everyone to respond by turning their lives around and getting on board. "The time is here," he said. There is no more reason to delay. We've spent our time in the wilderness and faced our demons. We've experienced God's care. We've seen a vision of a promised land that flows with the milk and honey of God's radical grace, forgiveness, and love. The time is now. The kingdom is at hand. Like the old gospel song says, "Get on board little children, there's room for plenty of more."

Calling it a kingdom, of course, implies the presence of an actual king who reigns, which is why it is so threatening to the various other nations and families and organizations and tribal groupings that occupy this world. They're going to resist. They're going to push back on anyone who dares to challenge the status quo. "Oh, you want to tell us how we should behave? No way. Not in my lifetime! Go ahead. Just try. Make my day." Remember, the kingdom that Jesus represents is one where Jesus claims priority over all other claims, and calls us to imitate him and live out his life no matter what alternatives we might be

tempted by. I think this is why we have an easier time thinking of the Kingdom of God as a place out there ... a destination that we're bound for because we think, "It sure as heck isn't going to take place where we live now." So I find it helpful to think of the kingdom of God not as a place, but as a culture. It's like people who try to maintain the culture of another country while they're living in a new country. It's not easy. You're going to face pushback. But as God's people, we are called to live as aliens ... as people who are in the world but not of the world, holding firmly to the culture of Jesus regardless of what or how the other surrounding cultures are trying to get us to conform.

When our society or our political leaders tell us to accept the ways of vengeance, self-aggrandizement, boastfulness or greed, we are called to be people of graciousness and humility. When everyone else all around us become fearful and defensive and unwelcoming, we are called to be loving and welcoming and inclusive. When everyone around us invokes an image of an angry demanding and vengeful God to justify their campaigns against those who are perceived as a threat, we are called to be a people who bear witness to the unfailing love and mercy and self-giving of God. And we bear that witness by living it out in lives of freedom and mercy and love. This is the way. This is the gospel. This is the good news that Jesus calls us to proclaim. God is not some two-faced monster ... one minute all loving and gracious, then the next minute hateful and full of vengeance. Even when the floods of destruction threaten to engulf the world, God provides a way of escape and invites *everyone* to get on board. No one is left behind unless, of course, they defiantly refuse to get aboard.

At our Ash Wednesday Service, I asked you to consider the questions, "How can we do this human life better? How can we move forward creatively? How do we reconcile ourselves to God and one another even in the seasons where we feel more like heaps of ash than human beings?"

How can we use these next forty days as a final time of preparation, of self-examination in order to face the challenges of re-entering the world when the pandemic is finally over? Well, first of all, we do it together. Jesus is here to walk the road with us. Jesus is here to give us the courage to face whatever we have to face so that we can emerge from the wilderness renewed and inspired with the resolve and fortitude to walk the road with him all the way to the cross and beyond into the promised land of love and mercy and grace.