

Mark 1:9-15 “Temptation Isn’t the Problem”

On Wednesday we came together to begin the forty day journey known as Lent. If you look at a calendar and do the math, you’ll find that it’s *more* than 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter. This isn’t some fluke that only happens when Easter falls on April Fool’s Day like it does this year. So how *does* 47 days become 40 days? Because we don’t count the Sundays. In some church traditions, people fast during Lent, but Sundays are feast days where you honor Christ’s resurrection. That’s when you get to break the Lenten fast. So I suppose if you’re giving up something like Girl Scout cookies for Lent, then Sunday is your day to indulge! (See, I’ve got your back Nakayla!) The number forty is significant because it’s a key symbolic number throughout the Bible. There are a lot of biblical stories, symbols, and rituals that involve the number forty. The two that come to mind are the 40 years the Hebrew people spent wandering through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land and the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness before he started his public ministry.

As I mentioned last week, Mark’s version of this story is pretty brief. Matthew and Luke give a lot of details about the dialogue between the Satan and Jesus. They described three very specific temptations, but Mark just says that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and was with the wild beasts while angels waited on him. Mind you, those three temptations that Matthew and Luke covered are spread all throughout Mark’s gospel, so it wasn’t like Mark ignored them ... he’d just not very detail oriented. So if Matthew and Luke’s version is so much more detailed, then what’s so special about Mark’s account? For me it’s the word that Mark uses for tempting or testing. He only uses it three other times in his gospel and that’s when certain Pharisees try to trip Jesus up over his interpretation of the Law. Every time they tried to test Jesus’ knowledge of the Law, Jesus would ask them, “Why are you trying to tempt me?” So according to Mark’s gospel, there are only two forces who are trying to throw Jesus off track – The Accuser, or “the Satan” who tempted him in the wilderness and

some of the more legalistic Pharisees who tried discredit him. So the greatest challenge for Jesus, according to Mark's gospel, was to stay the course and not get distracted from his mission.

Think about how many times this happens to us. It happens to me all the time! Wendy Martin, my administrative assistant at the camp I managed in Virginia would complain because I'd get so distracted just walking from one side of the camp to the other. The health inspector would come by the office to get my signature which indicated I read and understood his pool inspection report. I'd be up the hill at the canteen unloading supplies for the camp store and Wendy would call me on the radio. "Could you come down to the office? You need to sign off on this report." So I'd start walking down to the office, but on the way the session director would stop me and tell me that the ceiling fan in Oak Lodge was broken, two toilets were backed up in Salem cabin, and it looked like we had mice in Allegheny cabin. Then I'd make it down the hill a little farther, and one of my maintenance staff would stop me and tell me that the pump at the spring house wasn't getting enough water up to the reservoir and that we might run out of water by the end of the week if we weren't careful. So we'd talk about where there might be a leak or if we needed to start up the backup pump. Then I'd travel a few more yards and notice that an arm on one of the rocking chairs on the porch had come loose. So I just *had* to stop to pull it off the porch so no one would sit on it and get hurt. Finally I'd get down to the office where I'd sign the report all the while wondering why my assistant was giving me this death glare. She'd say, "Why does it take you 10 minutes to walk 100 yards from the canteen to the office?" Because I'd get distracted, which when you think about it is giving in to the temptation of thinking something else is more important than the task you're supposed to be paying attention to.

When we're tempted, it's usually *not* over something that's obviously evil. The appeal of temptation is often the desire to go off track. To make variations or sometimes less than ethical alternatives to achieving your goals. And we lie to ourselves and say, "Well, the ends justify the

means don't they?" But Jesus purposefully proclaims that the opposite is true. The means is the message. And once you embrace questionable means (however subtle they may be), the message has been fundamentally changed and you fail the test.

One of the purposes of the Lenten Season is for us to immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus. And the story of his public ministry starts right here when he entered the wilderness and boldly faced the one whose name means "The Accuser." He not only faced temptations during his time in the wilderness, but he also faced them throughout his ministry. He held the line and refused to compromise on the means that others might have used to get to the end. Lent is a time for us to stop and identify the things that constantly seek to derail us. It's a time for us to name their power in our lives and, in naming them, take a stand against them and against their influence on our behavior. For Jesus, the temptations were all about exploiting his power and gifts to attract attention, eliminate his enemies, and impose his will on the world by force. For us, it might be different. Not all of us face the same kinds of temptations, but the challenge is to face them intentionally, so that we might know we are up to the job and be able to face future challenges.

Notice Mark says that it was the Holy Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus had to prove to himself that he had what it took to face the journey that was in front of him. Likewise, Lent invites us to deliberately take stock and see what *we* are made of. That's why we often give something up or take something on during this season. It's an act of discipline. And the best Lenten disciplines are the ones that you thoughtfully, prayerfully and personally design for yourself. Maybe you do it with the help of a mentor who knows you and may be able to challenge you at your most vulnerable points. Those points where you're most vulnerable to falling into compromise, self-delusions and destructive patterns. During Lent we're called to challenge those things that would keep us from being all we were created to be, so that we might drive them back and emerge from the wilderness, probably not

altogether free from them, but knowing that we have what it takes to hold the line whenever those forces launch another attack.

In Mark's account of Jesus' life, Jesus emerges from his forty days in the wilderness and starts travelling around Galilee preaching the good news that the kingdom of God has come within our reach ... and that it's time for everyone to respond by turning their lives around and getting on board. "The time is fulfilled," he said. There are no more excuses to delay. We've spent our time in the wilderness and faced our demons. We've experienced the ministering care of God's angels and we've seen God's kindness, forgiveness, love and generous acceptance. The time is now. The kingdom is at hand. Get on board.

Now calling it a kingdom, of course, implies the presence of a king who reigns. Which is why this is all so potentially threatening to all the various organizations, political forces, families and tribal groupings that want to claim our allegiance and tell us how we should behave. The kingdom that Jesus stands for is one where he asserts priority over all those other claims, and calls us to imitate him and to live out his mission no matter what alternatives might come along and tempt us or order us to accept. I often find it helpful to think of the kingdom not so much as a place, but as a culture. Just as some people try to maintain the culture of another country while living in a new country, so we are called to live as aliens, holding firmly to the culture of Jesus, regardless of what the other surrounding cultures might be trying to get us to do.

When our society or our political leaders or even our religious leaders ask us to just accept some of the awful things that happen in this world ... when we are told to just get used to young men taking guns into schools or movie theaters or concerts to shoot people ... when we're told that we ought to overlook our national leaders' sins, or our favorite celebrity's abusive behavior so long as they're getting things done or keeping us entertained ... that's when we need to be ambassadors for peace, justice, grace and humility. When so many people have become fearful and defensive and unwelcoming to people who represent "the

other,” we are called to be loving and open and welcoming and inclusive. When so many toxic religious leaders invoke an image of an angry demanding and vengeful God to justify their campaigns against those who are perceived as a threat to our lifestyle or our values or our security or our righteousness or whatever ... we are called to be a people who bear witness to the unfailing love and mercy and self-giving of God. We are to bear that witness by living it rather than just saying it. Why? Because that’s the gospel ... that’s the good news that Jesus said is *right there* within our reach. God is not some two-faced monster, who is sometimes loving, sometimes vengeful. Even when the evils of our self-destruction threaten to overcome the world, God provides a way to salvation and invites all to get on board.

And in this divine reign, we are God’s ambassadors. And as God’s ambassadors, we need these wilderness times to re-examine our own call ... to face our own demons and to ensure that they have not been regaining the upper hand over us. And the good thing is that Jesus is here to walk the road over and over with us again. Jesus is here to give us the courage to face whatever we have to face and to overcome it so that we might emerge renewed and inspired and with the resolve to walk the road with him all the way to the cross.