

Sermon
Mark 1:9-15
1 Lent B; Sunday, Feb. 21, 2021
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

The gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent is always the story of Jesus' temptation. Always. We hear a version of this story every year. But when was the last time you noticed just how brief Mark's temptation story is? We did during Friday's Bible Study. His account of Jesus in the wilderness and his encounters with Satan are virtually non-existent. We're given a brief summary only. Brief and to the point. No details really. Just that it happened. One could say, and you might have, "Well, that's Mark for you. He writes the Reader's Digest Condensed Version of the Gospel." Of course Mark's version of Jesus' temptation would be abbreviated! Everything in Mark's gospel happens "immediately!"

It's kind of hard to preach on this account of the temptation of Jesus when there's not much to go on. Sure, I could bring in Matthew and Luke, but that's Matthew and Luke. What if we take Mark seriously? Mark – why is this episode of Jesus' life so short? Is it not important? Should we be paying attention to something else?

Maybe temptation doesn't matter much to Mark, or maybe it matters differently. So then, what does matter? In asking that question it appears that I could be giving more weight to the story of Jesus' baptism, which, honestly, is as brief as his temptation. Which wins? If you choose temptation, then you have to read further into Mark. What tempts Jesus? What tempts us? Yet Jesus' refraining from temptation is dependent on his baptism, as you know. God rips apart the heavens. The Spirit descends. The Spirit enters into Jesus. It seems that avoiding temptation is not successful without the presence of God. And therein lies our promise. Not necessarily that we have the power to deflect and defeat temptation. Not that we are capable of taking on Satan in the wilderness, or at least, I know I am not. Not so much that baptism is our guarantee that will shore up the walls to keep out that which seeks to threaten our belief, our trust, our relationship with God...

It's that now, when we battle with evil, when we struggle with those things that tempt us, we are changed because God is present. We are not asked to fend off evil on our own, which can be one major misinterpretation of giving up things for Lent. God tears away our every attempt to say, "While I appreciate your help, God, I've got this. I can figure it out." We individualistic humans generally don't want help. We don't even want to ask for help. For us, asking for help is a sign of insecurity, asking for help exposes weakness. But even more so, when it comes to issues of faith, asking for help indicates that we are incapable to prevent sin. Or to ward it off. What we are good at, though, is perfecting some sort of pretense before God.

But that's where Jesus' temptation in Mark should shatter our carefully constructed faith worlds, or at least the ones we create for the eyes of others only. Jesus goes into the wilderness, not with the conviction of success but only because he knows that God has chosen to rip to shreds any boundary, any structure, any ecclesiology, any denomination, any doctrine that would separate him from God. He enters the wilderness only with the promise of God's presence. Not with fighting skills, not with self-help

strategies, not with techniques for passing the tests, but only his personal knowledge that God is with him. He knows this only because of God's direct words to him that God will be with him. To preach the temptation of Jesus in Mark means that our preaching task is not to offer a list of temptations that Jesus overcame. The task is not that Jesus was tempted, resisted temptation and that we should be able to go and do likewise. Really? We are talking about Jesus, after all.

To preach the temptation of Jesus in Mark is to call attention to our greatest temptation -- the temptation to think that God is not present with us at every moment in our lives.

Sometimes, we are tempted to believe that God is absent. That God has given up. That God has withdrawn from us. Why? Well, you name it. For a whole host of reasons, I suppose -- Need any prompts here? I know I don't. I am fully aware that I am not worthy of God's love. Maybe sometimes you think that, too. If we are fully aware, if we are honest, we are able to think back on those excruciating times when it seems as if God has been silent in our lives.

But to preach Mark 1:9-15, to proclaim this piece of Mark's gospel on the first Sunday in Lent is to say clearly, unapologetically, without any doubt, that God is present in everything. We will not have the same temptations as Jesus. And naming Jesus' temptations as some sort of comfort in our experience implies that we can get through it, whatever "it" may be.

But we are talking about Jesus. JESUS!! The point of contact is not necessarily that Jesus was tempted yet without sin. That's not helpful. I can't be Jesus. No, way, no how. But, I can look at Jesus' temptation, whatever it is, whatever it turns out to be, and say, God was there with him. Just as God is with me in whatever I am going through.

God is present. In other words, what if we focus less on listing all the things that tempt us, less on some pep talk that we can deny all those so-called things that seek to get us to build our own golden calves, less on giving up the so-called temptations of our lives, and focus on the denial of that which tempts us the most...

...the temptation to think that God is not present. I love this simple, yet profound truth: our greatest temptation is to forget that God is present at every moment of our lives.

Because knowing that God is present in all things, and in all places, and in all circumstances, changes everything.

Amen.