

Mark 1:9-15

With Ash Wednesday we entered the most important time of the church year. The Lent/Easter cycle is centered on the celebration of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Season of Lent prepares us for that celebration. Lent invites us to rediscover who we are and who God calls us to be. And it begins with a cross of ashes on the forehead and ends at the foot of the empty tomb.

The journey of Lent begins in scripture with the testing of Jesus in the wilderness. Mark's version is typically brief. Immediately following his baptism, Jesus was "driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness" for forty days to battle it out with the devil and to discover what it meant to be Jesus. The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism, now drives him into the wilderness, that place of challenge, struggle, temptation and purification. Mark doesn't elaborate on the exchange between Jesus and Satan, but it's clear from Matthew and Luke's accounts that Jesus didn't give in to Satan's temptations.

Let's be honest, the same instinct that makes us want to give Jesus a visible halo in paintings encourages us to minimize the reality of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. There's no need to protect Jesus by saying that he only seemed to be tempted in order to set an example for us. That would hardly make Jesus a model to follow.

It's clear from the gospel accounts that this journey into the wilderness was no walk in the park for Jesus. Mark only mentions the wild beasts. Matthew and Luke give us more details of the temptations. Jesus met the author of evil in combat, and because he resisted to the end, he experienced the full range of Satan's seductive power. There is no temptation left outside his range of experience: "If you are the Son of God as you have just been told, use your miraculous powers you have just received. Command allegiance and make a sensation. Take a shortcut to your goal and I will give you everything you desire – power, influence, fame."

Where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus, the second Adam, held on to the truth revealed to him in his baptism. And where the Jews in the Exodus story failed in the wilderness, Jesus succeeded. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, "we never find out the strength of evil...until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means – the only complete realist (*Mere Christianity*, 1952).

Just as in his exchange with Adam and Eve, the devil sought to rob Jesus of his God-given identity and replace it with a false one. Jesus resisted these

temptations, not through an act of brute force or willpower, but rather by taking refuge in his identity based on his relationship with God. He refused to define himself or seek power apart from his relationship with God, giving his allegiance only to the Lord God who sustained him.

The devil is mentioned sparingly in scripture, but as C.S. Lewis writes in *The Screwtape Letters* (1961), there are two mistakes made about devils: one is to believe too much; the other, not at all. Now if Jesus wrestled with the devil, why should any of us think that the fact we are Christians makes us exempt from the fray? With us, the story is the same: the testing never ceases.

The common thread in the devil's temptations is an alternative identity and mission. As followers of Jesus, we too may be tempted to abandon the purpose and mission God has given us. Unlike Jesus, we may fail at times. By allowing our natural insecurities to lead us to mistrust God, we may be open to the temptation of thinking that it's all up to us, that God is not able to provide, and so we better take matters into our own hands. Jesus offers us a way out of this wilderness, a way to safeguard our true identity, by placing our allegiance in God's abundant grace and promises.

Lent offers us a time to examine the desert places in our lives and to seek God's guidance and strengthening for our journey. Now is the time to turn from the world's values, to turn from the will to get, to the will to give; to turn from the will to win, to the will to serve and to discover who we really are, our true identity and purpose as children of God.

Lent is also a time for confessing our failures. By the grace of God, we are called to repent, to turn again and face the One in whose image we have been created, and to redirect our steps in the way of Jesus. And just like Jesus, our identity given to us in baptism is what guides us through the challenges that await us on our journey.

We can take courage in our desert skirmishes and wilderness battles because we know the outcome of the story. Jesus beat the devil, not only in the desert, but also on the cross. God is, after all, in the business of taking what seems to have death written all over it and somehow bringing about resurrection life. Jesus cries out even today, "The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God is near; repent and believe in the good news."

Resources: Scott Shaun, 2013; David Lose, 2015, 2018; Synthesis, 2015; William Barclay, 2001; Henri Nouwen, 1992; Fred Craddock, et al, 1985.