



SAINT LUKE'S

LENT 1
YEAR B

GENESIS 9:8-17
1 PETER 3:18-22
MARK 1:9-15
PSALM 25:1-9

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

FEBRUARY 18, 2018

I don't know about you, but I have a bit of whiplash from reading Mark's Gospel today. Mark is characteristically direct in his narrative, perhaps a bit too so, and in the space of 7 verses deals with the baptism of Jesus, the descent of the Holy Spirit, the temptation in the wilderness, and the beginning of Jesus' public proclamation of the Gospel. And while the lectionary clearly has a thematic eye towards relating Jesus' temptation in the wilderness to our own experience of resisting evil, the temptation narrative in Mark today is barely more than a footnote, giving us very little with which to actually interact. One would have to turn to the fourth chapter of Luke or Matthew for a more detailed description of Jesus' temptation by the devil, with Christ's rejection, in the end, of the lusts of the flesh and the eyes, and of the pride of life.

And while the temptation of Christ, as I mentioned, clearly occupies center stage in the mind of our lectionary today, I'm more fascinated by how it serves as a bridge between Jesus' baptism by John and the beginning of his proclamation of the kingdom of Heaven. I think reading the temptation of Christ in the full context of the passage from Mark today will help us to gain a clearer view of the role this event served in Jesus' ministry and allow us to examine how we might more effectively overcome evil and Sin in our own lives. In doing so, it is necessary, for me at least, to compare my own experiences of seeking to overcome 'temptation' with the narratives around temptation that scripture presents us with. What do I mean by this?

Perhaps I speak for myself in saying that I have never had Lucifer appear to me and offer me the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshipping him; nor do I, myself, resonate with the experience of Job, who is tested because Satan appears before the heavenly court and goads God into a test of Job's devotion. 1 Peter's warning that Satan, the adversary, walks about like a roaring lion seeking to devour the faithful also seems to aggrandize the experience of something which seems to be much more mundane in actual practice.

So often I think language of temptation calls to mind cultural tropes like an angel and a devil on your shoulder, each arguing their case in to either ear. Our imagery and tone around temptation can either be rather impish or overly nefarious; a tiny devil or a roaring lion. The trouble with the prevalence of these perspectives it is that they can blind us to the often banal nature of evil and sin in our own lives. I realize that I have often done the greatest harm to myself and to others in my life when I was least aware; the decision to react coldly or selfishly, or my efforts to run from painful experiences or memories, did not present themselves before me as seductive options singing a siren's song, nor do I often recall making a conscious and concerted decision to speak to someone cruelly or sharply, having fully weighed the weight of my behavior. This is not to discount that sometimes in life clear moral binaries present themselves to us, but rather to acknowledge that I think our primary experience of sin is often much subtler, more habitual, more unconscious.

How do we practice obedience to God, how do we overcome this presence of sin in our lives then? I believe this is why Mark places the baptism, temptation, and beginning of Jesus' ministry together in the text in this way. Jesus' models for us through his actions and very life that the root of obedience to and participation in the will of God begins within the context of spiritual relationship. 'Right' and 'Wrong', 'Sin' and 'God's Will' are not these things which exist as cold, unembodied concepts that we blindly adhere to, but they are experienced through the course of our relationships with one another and with God. The proclamation that Jesus is God's well-beloved Son is not proud paternal affirmation for Jesus' sake, but the demarcation of a clear starting point for our own spiritual lives. True spiritual obedience to the will of God for us and for those whose lives we touch begins with a sensitivity and response to the love of God. It is not commandment box-checking or a stringent Lenten discipline alone, but an awareness to the places in the lives of those around us, and in our own lives, where God's love has been denied access. If we start here, like Jesus at his baptism, seeking right relationship with God, everything falls in to place.

Because the love of God may drive us outside the city walls, in to the unknown of the desert to face the greatest need. And in resisting evil there, we will neither be brushing devils off of our shoulders or looking for demons under every stone, but we will encounter great hurt and great need. We will encounter those who have need of much, like the gnawing hunger of Christ during those 40 days; will we do what we

can to alleviate that need, or will we turn away? We might encounter those drunk upon the excess of their success, and the pressure to prioritize financial and material gain over people in our own lives. We may encounter within ourselves a fearful pride, a grasping ego.

But so much of resisting evil is simply doing the good which needs to be done. The love of God will drive us past our blindness to the need for the love of God in our own lives and the lives of those around us. In these situations, may we model the example of Christ, and boldly proclaim the coming kingdom of God.

Amen.

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