

First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15

March 1, 2009

Michael W. Mooty

"... in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan"

What was Jesus tempted to do?

Mark is the *USA Today* of gospel writers. The bare facts. Narrative stripped of all but the essential details. No in depth reporting here. No long features continued on another page. Terse - lean. In seven verses Mark recounts the three events that marked the beginning of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus comes from Nazareth and is baptized by John in the Jordan River. At his baptism, Jesus sees a vision of the heavens opening and the Spirit of God descending. He hears a voice say: *You are my son, the beloved*. Baptism. Step one.

Step two. The Spirit of God drives him into the wilderness and the desert where he is tempted for forty days. He is alone but not alone. The tempter is present, and angels who offered God's comfort are present, and wild animals are present. Temptation. Step two.

After John is arrested, Jesus starts moving about the region of the Galilee, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God. Here is what he says: *The reign of God is at hand. Repent. Believe the good news*.

Baptism. Temptation. Proclamation. That is how Mark describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Today is the First Sunday in Lent - the forty day period of preparation for the celebration of Easter. For centuries the church has observed Lent as a time of reflection and prayer and repentance and self-denial. The traditional gospel reading for the First Sunday of Lent this Sunday is the story of the temptation of Jesus. Now I will tell you, preachers are happier in those years when the lectionary calls for the story to be read from Matthew and Luke. Those two gospel writers give *New York Times* accounts of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. They go into detail about what Jesus is tempted to do. You may remember the way those two gospels tell the story. Jesus is hungry. *Turn these stones into bread...* the tempter says. That is: use your power for your own benefit. Jesus says no. Jesus is taken to the top of the temple in Jerusalem. *Throw yourself down*, the tempter says. *Let the angels catch you*. That is: use your power to make people believe. Jesus says no. Then Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the earth. *All this can be yours*, the tempter says, *if you will just worship me*. That is: there is a way to be the messiah that does not involve the cross. Jesus says no.

Mark spares us these rich narrative details, and by his terse account, deprives the preacher of a ready-to-wear three points for a sermon. All Mark will tell us is this: after Jesus is baptized by John, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he is tempted. After the time of

temptation, Jesus begins his ministry, proclaiming the nearness of the reign of God. If Mark were the only gospel that had been written, the only gospel ever deemed authoritative by the church, that would be all we would know. Would we find ourselves asking: What was Jesus tempted to do? What was Jesus tempted to be? On the one hand, it is easy to see why Matthew and Luke felt compelled to elaborate on what this temptation was about. Mark will win no Pulitzer Prize for his temptation story. Too many details omitted. Too many unanswered questions. On the other hand, perhaps Mark tells the story just the right way. Perhaps Mark assumes that we should not have to be told what this temptation is all about.

There are at least three classic stories of temptation and testing in Hebrew scripture. You know them. Story one. The first man and woman created are in a garden. They walk freely in the presence of God. Their needs are cared for. The only stipulation of their presence in that place is that they not eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. They are told that if they eat that fruit, they will die. A serpent tells them that that is not true. This serpent tells them that if they eat the fruit, they will become like God - **knowing the difference between good and evil.**

Is this fair? These two people are brand new. They have no experience in making decisions. They have not had any practice making the little choices that have little consequences - you know what I mean. Your mother tells you not to touch a vase, but, when she goes into the other room, you cannot resist. You touch... the vase falls. Breaks. You are sent to your room for the rest of the afternoon. You are told to be in by midnight. Your friends don't have to be in until one. You think to yourself: *Mom and Dad will be asleep when I get home. They'll never know.* You slip in the back door and find your father sitting at the kitchen table. You don't go anywhere next Saturday night.

How do we learn that our actions have consequences - that when we choose to do something we have been told not to do, there are consequences - there is a price to be paid? How do we learn that? We learn that a step at a time, but making small choices - sometimes small mistakes - suffering small repercussions. But here is this man and this woman. They are brand new - they have never decided anything in their short lives. And now, they are faced with the ultimate test. *Eat this and you will die. No, you won't. Eat this and you will be like God.* They made the wrong choice, but I find it hard to be too critical of them.

There is a second story of temptation and testing. It occurs after the people of Israel have escaped from slavery in Egypt, led to freedom by Moses. They wander into the wilderness and camp at the foot of the mountain called Sinai. Moses goes to the top of the mountain to hear from God what God expects of these people. But this takes time. Moses is delayed. It takes longer than the people think it should. They grow restless... impatient. So they say to Aaron, Moses' brother: *Come, make gods for us who shall go before us. As for Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.* Aaron is easily persuaded. He takes their gold and their jewelry, melts it down, and fashions a golden calf. The people say: *These are your gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt.* And they decide to have a party. If you can't be with the God you love... love the god you're with. Moses comes down the mountain, breaks the tablets on which commandments have been written, takes the calf, burns it, grinds it to powder, mixes it with water and makes the people drink it. And Moses says to Aaron: *What did the people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?* Aaron: *It is the people's fault.* They said: *Make us gods who shall go before us.* Fingers point in every direction.

Why was Moses delayed at the top of the mountain? Why were the people given time to grow restless? Some think it was a test. The temptation was too great. *Make a god that we can see and touch. Make a god that appears when we want him and that we can pick up and carry around with us, a god that we can control, a god who will not place expectations upon us, a god for whom we will not have to wait, a god that will endorse our ideas of what life should be, who will not interrupt our good time.* If that kind of god can be purchased with a few bracelets and a necklace or two, it's well worth the investment.

The third story. I suspect that it is familiar. It is a kind of extended parable, a short story designed to give us insight about our relationship to God. There is a man named Job. He is a good and righteous man who enjoys a life of ease and prosperity. One day God and God's adversary are in conversation. God says: *Have you noticed my servant Job... what a good and upright man he is?* God's adversary replies: *Does Job fear God for nothing? Look how easy his life is. Take all that away, and we will see how righteous and faithful Job is.* God accepts the challenge - gives the adversary the power to do anything to Job that he will. Everything is taken from him: family, possessions, health. The question is: will Job turn his back on God? Does faithfulness depend on circumstances of life? Should we trust God when all is well and turn from God when we encounter pain and loss? For Job it was a temptation. For all of us, it is still a test.

Mark tells us that the Spirit of God drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He is in the wilderness forty days... tempted by Satan. That is all he says. No details. No vivid descriptions of what Jesus is tempted to do or be. That is because no descriptions are necessary.

There are small and inconsequential temptations. I was tempted yesterday morning to turn off the alarm and go back to sleep, even though I had a long list of things I needed to do. I was tempted last to have that bowl of ice cream before I went to bed, even though I was not hungry. Life is full of small temptations. I do not dismiss them. But they are not the great temptations.

The great temptations are to have life on our own terms and decide for ourselves what trajectory our lives will take and assert ourselves in arrogance and conceit, to reduce God to a manageable size and shape and to fashion God in the way that is user friendly, and to have God in our own way - in our own time, and to make faith contingent on having life the way we want it. Those have always been the great temptations. They were for Jesus. They are for us. We know them - not just from ancient stories. The ancient stories simply tell us what we know about ourselves. We know them because they whisper to us... every day and every moment.

Mark says that after he was baptized, the Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by Satan. That is all he says. But we know exactly what went on in that wilderness, because it goes on in here all the time. That is why we pray: *Lead us not into temptation.*