

“Some Surprising Aspects of Temptation”

Mark 1:9-15

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Temptation is a word we find both alluring and repulsive, yet we are drawn to it, both the word and the reality, like moths to a flame, like interstate traffic passing an accident, like pop-ups on a computer screen. Temptation is part of life, we know, we're just not sure what to do with it, whether to give in or fight like mad or consider some other way of proceeding. I mean, we don't want to be like the woman Mark Twain described as immorally impoverished, she had nothing from which to repent... We don't want to feign perfection. But nor do we want to embrace destructive things. So, what do we do?

In the spirit of my Ash Wednesday homily and in keeping with a theme I will pursue throughout Lent, I would suggest that we not try to run from or deny temptations, but rather face them like all of our frailties, not as a means of obsessing over struggle or guilt, but as a way of opening our lives to grace and truth. We can't really run forever anyway, temptation will find us one way or another. We might as well face it and see if there might be some benefit in doing so.

A good place to begin is with the customary Lent 1 story of Jesus' temptations, this year Mark's version, because in Jesus' experience we find some surprising aspects of temptation and thus identify some surprising possibilities for our experience.

For one thing, Jesus' temptations occur not because the Devil gets after him with a vengeance, but because God does. Mark's version of this story is brief - we'll talk more about the implications of this reality a bit later - it is just one of three short stories in our reading today. But the story begins with the claim that right after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness for forty days for what turns out to be a time of testing and temptation. Literally the text says the Spirit throws Jesus out. The Spirit does it, not the Devil. What is going on here?

It is a time of testing and temptation much like many of the faithful have endured before. God uses times like this to strengthen and prepare leaders for future service. The reference to “forty days” evokes images of Moses on the mountain with God in Exodus 24 and Elijah in his time of testing after Jezebel’s threat in 1 Kings 19. Both were tested for forty days. Jesus is being tested here, tempted in ways that he will be tempted throughout his life and ministry. Thus, what happens in the wilderness is a kind of training camp to get him ready for the regular season.

The fourth-century Bishop of Antioch and later Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, talked about preparation for baptism in a similar way. One of the most significant leaders of the church in the early centuries and one of its most prolific writers, surpassed only by Augustine of Hippo, Chrysostom said catechumens were like fighters preparing for the real battle after baptism. In one of his baptismal instructions, he said this (*St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, Paul W. Harkins, trans. Ancient Christian Writers, Vol. 31, pp. 140-1)

So also for you, these thirty days are like the practices and bodily exercises in some wrestling school. Let us learn during these days how we may gain the advantage over that wicked demon. After baptism we’re going to strip for the combat against him; he will be our opponent in the boxing bout and fight. Let us learn during this time of training, the grips he uses, the source of his wickedness, and how he can easily hurt us.

It is a clear and vivid image. Chrysostom talked about preparing for baptism as a way of getting ready for a life-long spiritual battle. This is what Jesus is doing in the wilderness as he is tempted. This is what we are doing, whether we realize it or not, when we face temptation.

Viewed this way, temptation presents an opportunity for us to grow in our faith. It doesn’t mean we should go looking for temptation, ask for trouble, as it were. Temptation will find us on its own. It means that when we are tempted, we might view the experience as an opportunity to prepare for the future, a way to discover who we really are in the midst of some challenge and further develop our character.

This is not to say that we will always overcome temptation and thus everything we see in ourselves in times of testing will be good. Often we see our weaknesses and flaws, but when we do, we are able to name our challenges, make some attempt to address them and grow.

In his book *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis noted that when he said his prayers at the end of the day and tried to think about his sins, nine times out of ten the most obvious was some sin against charity (pp. 164-165). He sulked or snapped or sneered or snubbed or stormed. The excuse that would come to mind was that the provocation was sudden and unexpected; he was caught off-guard. But, he reasoned, is that not how we find out what sort of person we are - how we act when we have no time to prepare, no time to hide our true feelings and character?

He went on to say that there are always rats in a cellar, but if you make noise and give them warning, they will scurry out of sight. If you sneak up quietly and turn on a light, you will see them moving about. So it goes with the rats in the cellars of our lives, whatever they are. When we are caught off-guard, we are able to see ourselves as we really are. We are tempted, and when we are, we see things we like and things we do not. Either way, we have an opportunity to grow - by building on our strengths and addressing our weaknesses.

The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. God can be at work in the midst of our temptation too. This much is surprising.

Another surprising thing we see in Jesus' temptations is how quickly they come after his baptism, as in immediately, Mark says, using one of his favorite words. It must be a jolting experience, to be so high on a spiritual mountain, being blessed by God and filled with the Spirit, only to be thrown to the wolves, literally, or at least some kind of wild beast, according to the text. But the truth is this sort of jolting experience is quite natural partly because we are vulnerable right after our mountaintop experiences and partly because once we are about God's work, once we become an operative in the ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil, we are a target for the forces of evil.

This is what Chrysostom was getting at in the preparation of baptismal candidates. He knew that if their faith was genuine, they

would be tested mightily after baptism. Once they devoted themselves to Jesus, they would be vulnerable to all the resistance he faced.

This seems like a rather obvious insight and an indisputable biblical perspective, but in the church in our culture we have somehow gotten the idea in our heads that faithfulness always leads to blessings. So, if we are doing things right as individuals and as a church, everything will go smoothly, and thus any sign of conflict or difficulty is evidence that we must be off-course.

How in the world did we ever get this idea? No one who has actually read the Bible and paid any attention to Jesus' experience could believe this *skubala* (to use a biblical word). In fact, no one who has paid attention to real life could believe it. Jesus is constantly facing resistance and outright hostility as are many of the most faithful Christians we know as well as some of the most faithful churches around the world. Why would things be different for us?

Part of Jesus' challenge is the Empire, the secular power of his day, Rome, but part of his challenge is with the covenant community, the would-be faithful and their leaders, the Jewish establishment and his own disciples at times. Nearly 2,000 years later, things haven't changed very much. There are secular challenges to our faith and there are challenges within the covenant community. Thus, temptation can come from many directions. The only thing we can be sure of is that it will come especially if we are about God's work.

I think of the resistance an African-American colleague faced years ago in Richmond, Virginia when he started a church in a very poor and downtrodden housing project. It came from every direction – city leaders who questioned his motives, Caucasian churches who suspected he just wanted money from them, African-American churches who saw him as a threat even though they made no serious effort to reach out to the 700 children in that project and their families, even African-American colleagues who told him that his only real success stories would leave the project and forget all about the church.

That pastor was mightily tempted to give up. Perhaps all this resistance was a sign from God. Who was he to think he could accomplish something where no one else thought it was possible? His

own feelings of inadequacy surfaced. He had never thought of himself as the sharpest, the most gifted, the most charismatic leader. That's how temptation can really get to us, turn the knife and make us struggle, by attacking our most personal vulnerabilities. But still, he thought of all those children and their families that no one seemed to care about.

So, he faced the temptation to quit, considered the alternatives and decided to keep pursuing his sense of God's calling. Twenty-five years later, that church is going strong, worshiping together and studying the Bible, offering job training and child care, mentoring and counseling.

Jesus faces temptation immediately after his baptism, right after he has been on the highest of spiritual highs. So might we be tempted, we shouldn't be surprised, though we probably will.

There is at least one more surprise in this story. It is the brevity with which Mark describes Jesus' temptations. It may be that this is just Mark's style. Everything happens quickly. His favorite word seems to be - immediately. While the other Gospels describe Jesus' ministry as taking place over the course of three years, everything in Mark fits into a single year. Our reading today is brief, just seven verses, but there are three stories in this passage – one about baptism, one about temptation and one about Jesus' preaching. Perhaps it's just Mark being Mark.

But perhaps there is something more here, a subtle takeaway that while temptation and how we respond to it are important concerns, they are not the most important things in the world and thus, we are wise not to get stuck in them. There are three stories here, but the overarching theme, the most important concern, is the kingdom or realm of God that is coming near in Jesus. That's what Jesus preaches, that's what Mark is most concerned about, that is where we are supposed to focus our attention – on this new way of being God brings in through Christ.

The implication for us is to pay attention to temptations and learn from them, but not allow them to consume us. God's new way of love and justice made possible in Jesus is supposed to do that. And the truth is, if we are focused on God's realm, we will be less vulnerable to temptation, and even when we fall short and give in to petty and tawdry things that are not worthy of us, there is this thing called grace. I don't

mean to be cavalier. We should never be dismissive about sin. But sometimes guilt can immobilize us. There is this thing called grace which comes in many different forms, but always goes back to God.

I have sometimes offered this counsel to young people making decisions, colleagues pondering a career change and parents struggling with some issue. What we decide in key moments obviously matters, sometimes more so than others. We don't want to be so unconcerned that we miss the significance. But nor do we want to be too concerned, so fearful of making the wrong decision, assuming there is only one right one, that we cannot make any decision. God can weave our many decisions, good and bad, into the tapestry of divine intent. Rarely can we blow it all in a moment, though some mistakes are devastating. But sometimes we just need the grace to realize that if we do our best, follow the light we have, pray and act in faith, God will take care of the rest.

That the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness is surprising, as is the notion that God may use our temptations for good. That Jesus' temptation comes right after his baptism is jolting, as is the notion that our mountaintop experiences may be followed by temptation, and the more faithful we are, the more challenges we might face. But perhaps the greatest surprise of all is that rarely is everything riding on our response to any one challenge. There may be consequences to any failure on our part, but as long as God is still God, grace will have the final word. God's new realm is here in Christ. There is no need to be stuck in the abyss of our own guilt and self-judgment.

The third verse of our hymn of discipleship makes a fascinating claim. It says, "When through the deep waters *I* call thee to go..." I, as in God, leads us into times of challenge, just like the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. But the verse goes on to say, "the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress." God may lead us into many challenges, but we will make it through because God will be with us every step of the way, just as Mark says the angels wait on Jesus in the wilderness. Temptation may bring many surprises, but the best surprise of all is that even temptation cannot separate us from God.