

## **“Filling in the Gaps, Imagining Possibilities”**

**Mark 1:9–15**

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The Gospel reading today may seem familiar. In fact, it should because we just read it in early January. In Year B, the Gospel text for Baptism of the Lord is used again the First Sunday in Lent. So, why do we read it all again? Partly because Jesus’ baptism, temptations, and the beginning of his ministry are connected. And partly because Mark says so little about Jesus’ temptations, the focus for today, only two verses.

In Mark, the action is fast-paced, everything happens “immediately”, including the temptations. One scholar commenting on this, offers, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to engage in a writer’s workshop with Mark to help him out a little, encourage him to include a few more details to help the reader.

But there may be a purpose in his brevity. One possibility is that he is covering up something or trying to draw attention away from these details. *There is nothing to see here. Jesus was tempted but didn’t give in. Let’s move on to the next scene.* But another possibility, a more likely one, is that Mark is leaving space for us to fill in the gaps, connect the dots, use our imagination, and find our place in the story.

Mark does this with other aspects of the Jesus story, including the resurrection. What most scholars believe is the initial ending of Mark has the early followers seeing an empty tomb, hearing a man dressed in white talk about Jesus being raised, and walking away in astonishment. There are no resurrection appearances of Jesus. Less is more for Mark, and often for the reader of any good literature. Open places in a story leave room for the imagination to work, and in the church, we would say, the Spirit as well. If this is the case here with this story about temptations, what might we imagine, where might the Spirit lead us?

One minimal detail to be expanded on comes right at the beginning of our focal verses, “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the

wilderness.” Intriguing! Week after week, we pray, at Jesus’ request, “Lead us *not* into temptation,” but here the Spirit leads Jesus right into it. More than that, the Spirit “drives him out” or “casts him out” into the wilderness - a verb in Greek, *ekballei*, that sounds a lot like exorcism. Jesus is not choosing this path. He is being propelled, almost violently, to greet temptation head-on.

There is intentionality here, purpose, but why? Why does the Spirit want Jesus to face temptation? Perhaps it is a way Jesus identifies with our experience, one of many. We all face temptation. Perhaps this is just inevitable, especially after Jesus’ baptism. He is now fully engaging the struggle between good and evil. He cannot help but face temptation, not just on this occasion, but throughout his ministry. But there is also an opportunity in temptation for Jesus, a way to define his character and identity more fully.

Matthew and Luke flesh out this reality as each temptation involves a choice between who Jesus is and who he might be. Will he think only of physical needs or consider spiritual ones as well? Will he use worldly power to accomplish good things or remain loyal to God? Will he do flashy things to attract a crowd or draw people near with acts of compassion? None of these paths would be evil in and of itself. But each temptation forces Jesus to choose who he will be and how he will go about his ministry. What happens in the wilderness sets the stage for everything that comes after it.

So, what are the implications for us here? We are wise to follow the petition of the Lord’s Prayer and not seek out temptation. It is an inevitable part of life, temptation will come our way, we don’t have to seek it. But perhaps we can view it as an opportunity, a way to deepen our self-understanding and commitment to our calling.

We are tempted in different ways. My college roommate’s grandfather, who was a Nazarene pastor and a man who tried to eliminate all bad choices from his life – for example, he gave up going to movies when he became a Christian and never saw even a Disney film after that – said that he couldn’t be tempted in ways others might, but he could be tempted not to love. Not all temptation is about a choice between good and evil. Often it involves a choice between greater and

lesser good, or between who we might be in order to live a decent life and who we are called to be in God's grace.

I think of the scene in Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the film based on it which stirred the most controversy. It involved Jesus being tempted sexually. Well, if he was tempted in all the ways we are... But the temptation is more than this. It is a dream sequence he has on the cross, and he is imagining what it would have been like to have had a normal life; if rather than dying a brutal death for others in his early thirties, he had settled down and married, worked a normal job and had children.

None of that would have been evil. In fact, the longing is understandable. It simply wasn't God's plan for his life. His temptation was to be anything other than who he really was.

Such is the most basic temptation of our lives. So, every time we are tempted, we have an opportunity to reveal and further define our true character and identity. We may be tempted to go with the flow, but we can make our own choices. We may be tempted to focus only on ourselves, but we can think of others. We may be tempted to accept the path of least resistance but God intends more for us, whatever it involves, and we can choose that path. We may not always respond appropriately, but temptation presents an opportunity for growth.

The fact that the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness tells us something. So does the fact that Mark uses the word Satan rather than Devil. It is the word used for the Evil One in the book of Job which begs the question as to whether perhaps Jesus is being tempted in the way Job was.

We speak often of the patience of Job, but as a mentor of mine pointed out, Job isn't patient, he is persevering. He keeps moving forward in the midst of all his suffering; he keeps expressing his frustration and anger to God (which frankly is well deserved); and he remains loyal to God, even though he fusses and feuds, cusses and spits every step of the way. So, what is Job's central temptation? To give up faith in God. It is a test of loyalty. Satan thinks he is only loyal because his life is so rich and full, but even when he loses everything, he does

not give up faith in God. He expresses anger, he asks questions, but he does not give up faith, he remains loyal.

Jesus is tempted in this way. He is tempted to give up his loyalty to God and God's calling in his life. And like Job, he certainly experiences frustration at times and questions his path. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he wonders if there isn't some way other than the cross. But in the end, he proves loyal.

Often this is the nature of our temptation. There are things we are tempted to say or do, ranging from the seemingly insignificant to the clearly pivotal – speaking in anger or not reporting some taxable income, having an affair or embezzling money – though we need to be careful, little things can lead to big things. But underneath all these choices lies a deeper concern – sometimes it involves our character or identity, other times it involves our ultimate loyalty. We try to rationalize, but either our ultimate loyalty is to God, or it is not.

The challenge is we may not realize our loyalty is involved. When we make decisions about our finances, not just what we give to the church, but all our finances, we feel like we have a right to make our own choices because it is our money... but from the perspective of Christian faith it is not, it is God's, to be used according to God's desires. When we decide how to use our time, we feel like each day is ours and only ours, but how we spend our time reveals our true priorities, what matters most to us, as opposed to what we think matters. In the words of a Bob Dylan song, we gotta serve somebody. We will be loyal to something or someone.

Considering Mark's use of the word Satan and how this character tempts Job, and using a little imagination, we see this dynamic of loyalty at work in Jesus' life and ministry, and in ours as well.

There is one other set of details in Mark's telling of this story that merits consideration. The text says that Jesus is with the wild beasts and the angels wait on him. We've moved past the ordinary. Homiletics professor David Schnasa Jacobsen says that in Mark, Jesus' temptation is not a theological conversation with the Devil but a forty-day, life or death struggle in a place of vulnerability. "Animals show up. Angels

wait on him. The temptation in Mark is not words, but an apocalyptic struggle that Jesus survives (workingpreacher.org).” Indeed it is.

First, there are wild beasts. Jesus goes to “where the wild things are” – to reference a delightful children’s book we had memorized when Ian and Ali were young. Are these wild things, these animals, friendly or hostile? We don’t know. We often don’t know.

I remember trying to go to sleep in the Masai Mara in Kenya in 2012 when I was there on a partnership mission trip. We were camping, or more like glamping, just across the river from where the animals were, and ostensibly were safe. But I kept hearing these exchanges of different kinds of animal noises that were unsettling. Our partner, Sam Harrell, informed us the next day that it was coyotes woofing at an elephant walking along the river, and the elephant woofing back.

If I had known those were the two animals, I could not have named which sounds came from which animals. We were safe, but it was difficult to trust that in the night. Does Jesus feel safe? Do we feel safe in our moments of temptation? What forces are at work within and beyond us? If we are completely calm, it’s because we are unaware.

But it’s not just wild beasts that show up, angels do too, and Mark says they “wait on” Jesus. It’s the same root from which we get the word “deacon” – deacons are humble servants who wait on others, care for their needs. We don’t know if the angels care for Jesus throughout the experience of temptation or just when it is finished. Other Gospel accounts suggest the latter. But either way, Jesus is not only surrounded by potentially threatening forces; he is accompanied by healing forces.

So are we. In fact, we are not alone in any temptation. There are angelic forces all around us - in human form, or beyond human form – but we are not alone. As we seek to respond in a way that reveals and further develops our character, identity, and loyalty to God, this is good to know. Help is always available, like at Hogwarts, if only we will ask.

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” There is plenty to see here for those with a little imagination and a willingness to listen to the Spirit.