

Lent 1, Yr. B
February 18, 2018
Mark 1:9-15

You will have noticed that, while we have been reading from the book of Mark for a number of weeks, last Sunday we skipped ahead to the story of the Transfiguration, found in Chapter 9, and in that reading we heard the Father name Jesus as his Beloved Son. This morning, we go back to Chapter 1 again and hear about the first time Jesus heard himself named the Beloved Son and what happened immediately after that. We hear that the same Spirit who hovered over Jesus like a dove drove him into the wilderness. The word “drove” is a powerful one; the Greek can also be translated as “thrown” or “hurled” as in hurling a javelin. So just as we heard last week that there was no staying on top of the mountain to bask in that experience, we hear the same urgency today – Jesus couldn’t stay to rest in the experience of his baptism. It’s clear that it was God who wanted Jesus to be in the wilderness – it’s like the two experiences went together. What is that telling us?

I think Mark is telling us a couple of things. First of all, just like last week, the message is that we can learn things we need to know about ourselves both in mountain-top experiences and in valley experiences. And, while we’d prefer the mountain-tops, perhaps there are some things we only learn in the valleys. Jesus’ experience in the wilderness was part and parcel of the baptism experience because, while in the one he heard that he was God’s beloved Son, in the other he learned what that meant.

Look first at the setting. What do we think of when we think of wilderness? The presenter at last week’s clergy retreat talked a bit about this. The wilderness brings up ideas of danger and solitude and of a place where everything is stripped to its essentials. There’s nothing to distract us from facing the ultimate questions. We maybe don’t wander off to an actual desert but I think we know what it means to be in a wilderness – perhaps the wilderness of illness or grief or depression – those are all negative images. But for us, as for Jesus, the wilderness can also be a place of revelation. For Jesus and for us, it seems like the wilderness was about those questions that I mentioned last week are key in Mark’s gospel: who am I? In Jesus’ case, what does it mean to be the Son of God? And for each of us, what does it mean to be a child of God?

Mark doesn’t spell out what went on in the desert, but both Matthew and Luke expand this passage and tell us that Satan arrived and tempted Jesus: you’re hungry, right? Why don’t you turn these stones into bread? You can feed yourself then and everybody else too. You can do that IF you’re the Son of God. And then there was the temptation to prove that he was really God’s son by throwing himself off the temple, because surely God would send his angels to catch him before he hit the ground. That’ll surely prove that you’re special! And then the final one, in which the devil showed Jesus the whole world and said that he’d give Jesus all the kingdoms, all the power, if Jesus would just worship him. On one level, these are temptations we all face. The first one, to have enough bread, tempts all of us – it’s about basic safety and security. The second one is that to be chosen means to be special in the sense of being protected, getting special treatment, special status. And then, of course, the one about power.

Doesn't that sound kind of good? If I just had the power, I could do so much GOOD with it. And isn't the history of the Church rife with examples of how well that worked out, from the time of Constantine, when Christians came into political power, or the Holy Roman Empire, or Calvin's Geneva, or Cromwell's England. Henri Nouwen has written that "the long painful history of the Church is the history of a people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the Cross, being a leader rather than being led." And remember Lord Acton's famous quote: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But it's not just the church that faces those temptations. In the Clearing class that met on Thursday, we watched the movie, *Gandhi*. At one point he was walking with a reporter who said, "You're an ambitious man." And Gandhi stopped in his tracks, looking appalled and said quietly, "I hope not." In fact, Gandhi's life and work was a contemporary example of trying to figure out what God meant for him to do, wrestling with those same questions of whether to choose power over love, or security over service.

Someone has pointed out that the worst temptations are not the temptations that lead us downward, but rather those that tempt us upward, that is, to take the place of God. We see that here in the temptations of Jesus, but doesn't it go all the way back to Adam and Eve where the temptation really was to push God out of the way – to become gods themselves? I think here also of the Jewish legend of Lucifer, who was apparently the most powerful and most glorious of all the angels. He ran amok, though, because of those gifts. His spiritual pride was his undoing and he was eventually cast out of heaven by Michael the Archangel. I was recently telling someone that the name Lucifer means "Light-bringer." Some years ago I had a telephone call from a seminary friend who was telling me that she was organizing a procession at church and had one woman carrying a special candle. Unfortunately, my friend titled that role as "the Lucifer" – perhaps not surprisingly, the woman took great offence. My friend asked me if she'd been correct with the meaning of the title. My response was that she was probably linguistically and technically correct, but not too wise!

One place to look when we look at where we're most vulnerable to temptation is to look at our strong points because those gifts can also be spiritual land mines. You may remember a number of years ago when we had a woman from California come and do a retreat around the Enneagram. If you did it, you'll remember that it's a self-awareness tool that begins with dividing people into nine personality types. Each of us falls primarily into one type and each type has strength, a gift, but also an underlying weakness. The idea is to figure out which type you are and then to work to redeem the weakness, which is the shadow or the underbelly of the gift. As an example, ones are people who are perfectionists; their temptation is to anger and impatience with all those who aren't and who don't measure up. Twos are lovers, but their trap is that they want to have that love acknowledged and repaid – they need to work to love without any strings attached. The whole thing is designed to help you see, and then work on, the undersides of your gifts.

To go back to the clergy retreat for a minute, and the idea of demons visiting us in the wilderness, the presenter had a picture of Anthony of the Desert, one of the first monks to move out into the Egyptian desert. The picture showed him surrounded by some pretty ugly demons. The presenter pointed out that some people think of demons literally, but that we can also think

of demons with quotation marks, which is actually where I wind up. Those “demons” that beset us are certainly the usual temptations, but also things like fear and envy and self-doubt. And speaking of Anthony of the Desert, the desert fathers and mothers wrote about the demons that beset them. When we think about them wrestling with demons, for some reason, we think about sexual temptations. But their actual writings talk about their biggest temptations as being around anger. They meditated on Jesus’ command to love their enemies and tried to empty their minds of the rage, greed and pride that could tear the soul apart and make them close their hearts to others. (Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*)

Like Jesus, we’ve been chosen. Like Jesus, we’re being asked to be God’s body in the world. Like Jesus, that means that we need to understand what that means and to purify our hearts of all that would lead us astray. I’d like to close with a Franciscan blessing:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. Amen.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. Amen.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. Amen.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.

And the blessing of God, who creates, redeems and sanctifies, be upon you and all you love and pray for this day, and forever more. Amen.