

Lent 1B 2021 Sermon

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 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.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

In today's Gospel, God claims Jesus as his beloved son, just as, in the Old Testament, God had claimed ancient Israel as his beloved son. And just as Israel came through the waters of the Red Sea into the Sinai Desert, where they wandered for 40 years and were tempted, so Jesus now comes through the waters of baptism into the *Judean* Desert, where he will likewise suffer temptations, for 40 *days*. God's beloved child *Israel* proved **unfaithful** in temptation; will God's beloved child Jesus reverse that unfaithfulness, break that pattern and put all his trust in God?

This Season of Lent into which **we** have just entered recalls for **us** Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. How will **we**, – amidst the wild beasts and tempters of **our** day, respond to the *many* temptations that beset **us** in this wilderness in which we have been living this past year?

The fact that immediately *after* Jesus was baptized the Holy Spirit drove him into the desert to be tempted by Satan shows us that, in the words of John Shea, "The baptismal gift of Spirit is not a personal privilege but the foundation for a struggle... Mark's Gospel is not simply good news. It is good news in a bad world. The mythological character of Satan... [symbolizes] the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that... actively keep people alienated from God and divided among themselves."¹

And, my friends, if we are honest with ourselves, is there not, in our own world **today**, an inner, invisible energy within people, groups, and social and political structures that seems to actively keep us divided among ourselves? Perhaps it was this very inner, invisible energy of divisiveness that we saw erupt at our nation's Capitol Building last month, among otherwise good people? But here's the thing: that inner, invisible energy that actively keeps people divided among themselves is the same energy that keeps them alienated from God, despite all claims that they are on God's side.

Now, Mark's *usual* symbolic word for describing this inner, invisible energy that alienates people from God and one another is "demon;" and Jesus will certainly encounter many people in Mark's Gospel who are possessed by demons. But there are also many people in Mark's Gospel who are good, upright, respectable, religious people – Pharisees, scribes, priests, disciples – who succumb to the subtle temptations of this inner, invisible energy that actively keeps people alienated from God and divided among themselves. Remember the serpent in the Garden of Eden, that tempted Adam and Eve, resulting in their alienation from God and from the earth itself? That serpent is described in Genesis as being "the most *subtle* of all the wild animals the Lord God had made." (Gen 3:1, NJB, RSV) The Tempter is indeed subtle – *and* **deceptive**.

Professor and preacher Fred Craddock notes, "...if the temptation is real, it most certainly is *deceptive*. Temptation is not obvious, definitely not a caricature: 'Hi, I am Satan; I am here to tempt you.' The tempter often looks and sounds like a friend or relative. 'Get behind me, Satan!' was not Jesus' word to the local fiend but to his friend, Simon Peter."²

Our own temptations toward this inner, invisible, alienating energy are strong; largely, I think, because our ego identity – who I am as different and special – *feeds* on a sense of separateness and opposition. Eckhart Tolle writes, "[T]he ego needs problems, conflict, and 'enemies' to strengthen the sense of separateness on which its identity depends."³ That's the temptation we so often face: To nurture our egos by feeding on that inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that actively **keeps** people alienated from God and divided among themselves. This energy is strong, indeed; and when we are caught up in it, our ego selves can feel so invigorated and "alive!"

But alive we are **not** (at least not with the life of God) when we are feasting on that inner, invisible *energy* that keeps people, groups, and social and political structures alienated from God and divided among themselves.

I love John Shea's definition of "sin:" "Any thought, deed, or disposition that breaks the *flow of life* between God and the self, as well as between the self, other people and the earth."⁴ When you and I sin, in thought, word, deed, or disposition, we **break** the Trinitarian *flow of life* between God and our self, as well as between our self, other people and the earth. All of those people who stormed our nation's Capitol on January 6 carrying crosses or Bibles or signs with the name "Jesus" on them, may have *thought* that the energy they were feeding on was *divine* energy; but they were deceived. For they had broken the flow of God's life between God, themselves, and those whom they opposed, which is the definition of sin. More likely, they were feeding on that inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that actively keeps people alienated from God and divided among themselves. It is a seductive and inebriating energy, indeed; but it is not of God.

We have all been through an extended wilderness experience this past year. For many of us, we can't wait to escape from this wilderness and return to our "normal lives." But 3 out of 10 Americans, according to a recent poll, have said that their faith has *grown* during this wilderness time.⁵ Throughout the Bible, the wilderness is not a *negative* place; it is the place of transformation. We should remember that it was the *Holy Spirit* who **drove** Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Jesus' time of testing was something God wanted his beloved Son to go through. For the voice of the Tempter is subtle and deceptive, and would, at least once, speak through Simon Peter, leader of the disciples. Jesus must be ready to *identify* that inner, invisible energy of the Tempter, that seductive, heady energy which, though it may make us **feel** righteous and powerful, actively keeps people alienated from God and divided among themselves. The Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan because God wants his beloved Son to know what you and I experience: this inner, invisible, seductive, yet alienating, energy.

And he wants **us** to know that, though we may be in our own wilderness with the wild beasts, we are also amongst God's angels, channels through whom flow the divine Life, giving us strength and courage to turn away from the siren voice of the Tempter, and hear what Jesus says when his 40 days are over: "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" (Mark 1:15, CEB)

Trust the energy of God's love.

AMEN

1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 80

2 Fred Craddock, "Test run (Mark 1:9-15)", *Christian Century*, Feb. 22, 2003 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-02/test-run?code=4HHQZg3xqbRLxAsA8hYY>

3 Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (p. 161). New World Library. Kindle Edition.

4 source lost

5 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/covid-19-religion-survey-pew-pandemic-strengthened-faith.html>