

Every year on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent we have a Gospel reading about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness from either Matthew, Mark or Luke. This year our version is from Mark's Gospel. I've preached on Matthew and Luke's versions of the temptations many times. But I've never preached on Mark's version. The main reason—it's very short, actually very VERY short.

Matthew's version is 183 words in the original Greek New Testament. Luke's version is 221 words. Mark is only 31 words in Greek, 33 in our English translation. So Mark's version of the temptations is roughly one-sixth the length of Matthew's and one-seventh the length of Luke's. So during my ordained ministry, in the past 8 times this reading has come up in our 3-year cycle of readings, I've skipped over it. I've preached on the Old Testament lesson or the Epistle lesson, or on Lent in general.

But this year I want to talk about Mark. Though brief, he actually has something unique and important to say.

Mark is so brief, though, that they've expanded the reading. Our reading today goes from verse 9 to verse 15. But verses 9, 10, and 11 are a repeat—we heard them just 6 weeks ago on January 10. They formed the end of the reading that Sunday about Jesus' baptism. And verses 14 and 15 are a repeat—they were part of our reading 4 weeks ago on January 24, about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. I preached about that part of the reading that day. So if our lesson is verses 9 through 15, and you take out the repeats, 9, 10, 11, 14, and 15, then what are you left with? Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus. 2 verses: 12 and 13:

"And the Spirit immediately drove (Jesus) 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."

And verse 12 is really introductory. It tells us that immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. And the word for "drove" is very strong. In the rest of Mark, and in Matthew and Luke, it's the word used for casting out demons. Jesus is cast out of human society for a time, and is forced out by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness.

So really, that only leaves us with verse 13 for the actual temptation of Jesus:

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

The word for temptation is also the word for test. Jesus is being tested by this experience in the wilderness.

And when Mark says Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days with the wild beasts, he's not suggesting that Jesus is on some fun little camping trip in a scenic National Park with a bunch of fuzzy animals gathered around a campfire singing Kumbaya and roasting marshmallows. To Mark's audience, the wilderness was a dangerous place. And the wilderness was thought of as a place where the demons dwelt.

And on top of that, the wild beasts were not cute little critters. They were dangerous. In fact, the word for beast appears 38 times in the New Testament. 7 times it refers to dangerous animals. Once it refers to humans behaving like negatively like brutish animals. And 30 times it refers to a demonic figure. In the book of Revelation, no better term can be found for the demonic figure that opposes Christ than "The Beast."

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

So, when Mark's audience in Rome in the 60's or 70's first heard these words, they would have thought Jesus was in a dangerous place: the wilderness, the realm of Satan, the abode of demons, the region of dangerous wild animals. And wild animals would have had one more grim layer of meaning for Mark's audience. At that point in history, the Roman Christians would have either been enduring or would have just come through the vicious persecutions of Caesar Nero. And in Nero's time, many Christians in Rome were killed in the Coliseum by being torn apart by wild beasts.

So for Mark's original audience, they would have thought that Jesus was in a tough situation. In the wilderness, tempted by Satan, and having to deal with wild beasts.

But there's one more piece. And that piece is vitally important.

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

A few verses before, at Jesus' baptism, Mark tells us clearly that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus. And a heavenly voice from God the Father says, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And immediately after that, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. There he has to contend with Satan and the wild beasts. There Jesus is tempted or tested. But Jesus is not abandoned. He is God's beloved Son. And God's angels are there to offer Jesus an especially palpable sense of God's presence and comfort.

And after that period of testing or tempting in the wilderness, the very next thing Jesus does in Mark is to go out and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Satan is not in charge. In fact Jesus begins casting out demons a sign that Satan is already defeated. The demonic forces that oppose God will not win. The wild beasts will not win.

God is pleased with his beloved Son. And the Son goes out to proclaim his Father's love for all of his beloved children.

We've been through a terrible 12 months. It has been a terrible wilderness experience for all of us.

We have seen the wild beast of a terrible virus wreak havoc around the world. And in our own land, we've seen wild beasts of violence unleashed by extremists on the fringes of both ends of the political spectrum.

And when we see such wildness in our midst, it's all too tempting to respond in a beastly way ourselves. Lashing out with tooth and claw is a primordial instinct. And it's all too easy to fall prey to such beastly instincts and drives.

But we follow God's beloved Son who calls us to follow his way of mercy and forgiveness and love. He commands us even to love our enemies and pray for those who wish us harm.

He himself has been tested by the demonic and the beastly. He has contended with the worst our world can dish out, even wrongful death by slow torture on a cruel cross.

And yet he proclaims the Good News of the Kingdom of God. And he calls us to follow in that way.

What will we choose?

The way of tooth and claw? Or the way of Jesus Christ?

Maybe this Lent, that is OUR test.