

Scripture Comments

Mark 1.9-15

March 1, 2009

Temptation

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The reading from Mark for the First Sunday in Lent contains three brief scenes, two of which we have already read. The baptism of Jesus was read on the First Sunday after Epiphany (January 11, 2009), the first preaching of Jesus was included in a longer reading on the Third Sunday after Epiphany (January 25, 2009). Today, our attention is focused on verses 12 – 13, the sojourn into the wilderness. Compared to Matthew's and Luke's much greater detail in reporting this story, Mark's interest is in the wilderness more than the temptation.

In verse 10 the Spirit has descended on Jesus like a dove. Now, in verse 12, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. This verb, which is sometimes softened by translators or commentators, is the same word used later when Jesus casts out demons and when Jesus “threw out” the money changers in the Temple. The intent is to describe real force. When we read this statement, we are puzzled because we read this through our Trinitarian lens. We wonder how the third Person of the Trinity makes decisions for Jesus. Mark does not work with these categories. Mark's concern is to describe the necessity of Jesus' going into the wilderness. The wilderness has already served as an important location for John the Baptist. Now Jesus must go there. The theme of a new exodus, partially developed in the context of John the Baptist, is being continued. Israel experienced God in passing through the waters of the Red Sea only to encounter trails and temptations in the wilderness. Jesus, still wet from the Jordan, is plunged into the wilderness.

It is not mere coincidence that Mark ties together the reference to forty days with Jesus' temptation by Satan. The number forty recalls several important Biblical stories: the time period of the flood (Gn. 7.4, 12, 17), the wilderness years of Israel (Ex. 16.35; Deut. 2.7), and the flight of Elijah (1 Kings 19.4-8). In all of these stories the preservation of life in the midst of danger is crucial. The explicit presence of Satan emphasizes the threat implicit in being in the wilderness for forty days. There is also the darker side to Israel's wilderness experience. Mark's audience would also recall how Israel often failed the tests and rebelled against God, which led to suffering the wrath of God. Again contrasting the telling of this story by Mark to that of Matthew and Luke, Mark is content with suggesting rather than itemizing the temptations. In fact, the outcome is implied by the story that follows.

The mention of the wild beasts reminds us of other Biblical stories that promise God's protection, such as Job 5.22-23; Psalm 91.13; Isaiah 11.6-9. That Jesus emerges unscathed from his experience with the wild beasts indicates divine protection. The indirect reference comes in the statement, “and the angels waited on him.” The verb used here, *diakonoun*, is rendered as serving or ministering. It is the word I noted in the story of Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law (see Comments from 2-8-09; Mark 1.29-39).

It is also important to note that Mark's description of the angels "waiting on" Jesus is not after the temptation, but during it, while in the contest with Satan.

At the beginning of Mark (1.3-4) the wilderness is a place of divine revelation but in today's story the wilderness is a place of danger. Later in Mark, the wilderness, having been tamed, becomes a place of retreat from the crowds and from the misunderstandings that press upon Jesus (1.35, 45; 6.31-32, 35). We are left wondering, "How does the wilderness sojourn function in the introduction to Mark's version of the Gospel? Why include this story that suggests that Jesus is even momentarily at risk?"

One reason is that the setting of the wilderness identifies Jesus with John the Baptist. Most important is that the identity of Jesus in this Gospel always puts Jesus at risk. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus finds himself in conflict that will culminate in the cross. This wilderness sojourn anticipates that danger.

The wilderness sojourn prevents us from leaping to the conclusion that Jesus' ministry will be one of triumph, exaltation and glory. We already realize that this story is not all heavenly voices and powerful proclamation. Danger lurks at every turn. At the same time, we understand that the dangers that wait for Jesus will not ultimately defeat him. The one who journeys safely with wild beasts, and whom angels feed, will finally triumph.

Even though the church may encourage it, Mark does not encourage his audience to an easy identification with Jesus. It is clear that this evangelist understands that Jesus' life is distinct from the lives of ordinary folk. The Gospel According to Mark invites us to identify with the disciples, the women around Jesus, or the religious leaders. This wilderness sojourn may be the one exception to that generalization. When we read of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, it seems lifelike and close to home, close to our own experience.

Jesus' temptation is a preview of the many struggles that will test him during his ministry, struggles that will often involve demons, forces of nature, opposing clergy, and even his own close friends. It is natural, when we read this brief story, to look ahead to the Garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane was a garden, but for that one night it, too, was a wilderness.

References:

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.

Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.