

## **“WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU TURN”**

Matthew 5:3-12; Mark 1:9-15

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In just six sentences, Mark covers Jesus' baptism, his forty days in the wilderness, and the beginning of his public ministry of announcing the reign of God. Mark's is the shortest of the four gospels, and no wonder, because he mostly give us just the bare bones. He seems to want to move the story along. This can be frustrating to readers. We find ourselves wishing for just a little more explanation, or wanting to say, "give us details!" Nowhere is that more evident than in Mark's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness, following his baptism.

This is a story told in all three of what we call the "synoptic gospels" – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's Matthew's and Luke's versions that are the more-well known and have shaped our perceptions of this part of Jesus' story. Matthew (4:1-1) and Luke (4:1-12) don't tell it exactly the same way – the differences are quite interesting - but they both focus on and tell quite a bit about Jesus fasting and being tempted by the devil, while he's in the wilderness for 40 days. They relate a conversation between the devil and Jesus, in which Jesus is faced with – and refuses – three specific temptations – which could be said to reflect temptations all of us face, albeit with less successful resistance.

There's the temptation to try and make bread from stones, implying a personal self-sufficiency that has no need of God's providence or wisdom. There's the temptation to strive for power over others, which leads to idolatry. There's the temptation to an arrogant confidence that God is at our beck and call – on our side – ready to rescue us from the consequences of any of our foolish, dangerous, or self-centered choices we might make. Jesus will not go down any of those paths. He turns away from these temptations toward the purpose and ministry God has for him.

Now, that's Matthew and Luke. Mark gives us none of that detail; he simply mentions, briefly, that Jesus was tempted by the devil.

It's traditional to read one of these three texts in church on the first Sunday in Lent - a season when we give particular attention to the realities of sin and temptation in our lives ... and repentance, turning away from that sin and temptation. This is hard, if you take it even a little bit seriously. Sometimes it means confronting truth about ourselves, or our world, that are not pretty. So it's no wonder that Matthew's and Luke's stories, which always feel a bit dark to me, have sort of shaped our thinking about Lent.

But Mark has quite a different feeling.

As in the other gospels, here the wilderness time is understood as a turning point in Jesus' life, and a kind of preparation for his public ministry. It seems not unlike the practices of many cultures where a time alone in nature is a coming of age ritual, a getting ready to take on a new role and responsibilities in the community. All three of these gospel writers agree that it was the Spirit of God that led Jesus into the wilderness. It's not something that *just* happened.

When the gospels were written, of course, the idea of "wilderness" didn't have the same connotation it does for us today, of pristine beauty to fill us with awe or vital ecosystems to protect. For most of human history "wilderness" has been seen as alien, unknown, perhaps empty and barren, a dangerous place for people - spiritually as well as physically. It became a metaphor for adversity and lostness.

But in the Bible, wilderness is also a place where people, in spite of adversity – always unexpectedly, it seems – meet God. Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness harks back to the people of Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt... a difficult but formative period in their history in which God led them and fed them and made a covenant with them.

Mark doesn't say all that, but he doesn't have to. He assumes that his readers share this cultural framework, and understand that "wilderness" means both danger and spiritual possibility. He didn't anticipate us and our many questions, of course, or maybe he'd have told us more!

About the wilderness time, Mark tells us only three brief things: Jesus was tempted by Satan. (No details. No conversation.) He was with the wild beasts. (What beasts? What does "with" mean?) And angels – messengers from God - waited on him. (I'd really like to hear more about this, wouldn't you?) But that's all we get.

More questions than answers here, for sure. But I'm coming to see that reading Mark's gospel is a different kind of experience. Maybe it's on purpose, maybe not, but this gospel kind of pushes us into a different mode of interacting with the story. We can see it as a puzzling, disappointing, even frustrating lack of information to the kinds of questions we usually bring to studying the Bible. You know: what exactly happened? why does Jesus do that? what does this word mean? what does that image represent? what's the teaching we're supposed to take away? what is this story *about*?

But there's another way to look at it: Mark seems to leave so much unsaid that there are these places where we have to exercise some wonder, some open-ended curiosity, a willingness to accept mystery and unanswered questions... maybe even imagination, as we explore the story.

Here in Mark, the nature of that wilderness time is not quite so defined as it is in Matthew and Luke... so we begin to wonder more about it. 40 days by yourself is a long time. Mark mentions temptation, but what else might have happened? How might those weeks have prepared Jesus for his ministry? How might God's messengers ("angels") have cared for him? Could that have

been just as significant as the temptation? Might the wilderness have been for Jesus not just a time of spiritual struggle, but a time of nurture as well? It seems possible that Mark might have seen it that way.

If we pause at these “open spaces,” these places where the story is not quite filled out, instead of reading right on past, we sometimes find opportunities for fruitful wondering. I’m not suggesting that we have free rein to read anything we like into the story. Just that the meaning is not as foreclosed as we may have thought, and that there can be more than one way to think about it.

A couple of years ago, when I was preparing for an Adult Ed class, I came across an extraordinary series of pictures based on the story of Jesus in the wilderness. They are by an English artist, Stanley Spencer, and they’re unlike any other pictures of Jesus I’ve seen. They’re also completely different from other art based on this story (most of which shows Jesus looking pained while being harassed by a stereotypical and scary-looking devil). Spencer’s paintings are different: they are filled with wonder about Jesus’ experiences in the wilderness; they invite us to consider ways that time could have helped to shaped his sense of purpose and the direction of his ministry.

Among other things, Spencer’s paintings show Jesus with a family of foxes, with a hen and chicks, holding a scorpion, admiring a field of flowers... all images that Jesus used to talk about himself and about the reign of God. When I first saw them, I was taken aback by this radically different way of imagining the wilderness time of Jesus. But in Mark’s gospel, I see the invitation to consider fresh ways of seeing.

What if we begin from Mark’s version of the traditional first Sunday in Lent reading, and consider fresh ways of seeing *Lent*? Maybe even fresh ways to think about repentance.

Repentance isn’t everybody’s favorite sermon topic; I know that. We associate it with hellfire and brimstone preachers and judgmental forms of Christianity, with communities that exclude, with guilt and shame, punishment and harm in the name of Jesus. A whole season for repentance? Well, six weeks of repentance seems... dreary, maybe overly self-absorbed, and of questionable helpfulness. But... it’s *tradition*! What are we gonna do?!

In the Hebrew Bible the word for repentance is *shuv* – which means “turn.”

So we talk about repentance as turning away from sin, from what is harmful, from what separates us from God and our neighbor, from what is destructive of relationship and community.

To repent is to turn from all that. But that’s just the beginning.

What happens when you turn around? You see something different. You get, literally, a new vision. You get a fresh perspective. You focus your eyes, and your attention, in a new place.

You realize there are other things to see, more options than you thought. You see a new path, a different way. You head in a different direction.

When Jesus emerges from the wilderness, something has changed. He starts on a new road. This is where his ministry begins. He starts talking about the reign of God being near. He invites people to repent... *AND* believe the good news. True repentance moves us not only away from something, but toward something.

What might that movement be for you this Lent? What might it be for us? Those are the questions we'll be contemplating over the next few weeks.

This Lent, our Worship Team is inviting us to see the season, and to envision repentance in this more complete way. Yes, sin, is as destructive and prevalent as it ever was. Yes, we need honest reckoning with both personal and corporate sin. But guilt and regret don't take us very far into genuine repentance. The invitation for us is to turn from what is harmful to what is life-giving, from what is destructive of community to what builds community, from anything that denies the love of God to what reflects that love.

So real repentance is about a whole lot more than what we say or feel during a prayer of confession in church. In that spirit, each week during Lent, the Worship Team will be inviting us to let our Lenten intentions "spill over" into our after-worship time. In the Narthex during Coffee Plus you'll find some activities that represent a Lenten practice of "turning toward." Turning toward what is life-giving. Turning toward what build community. Turning toward connection. Turning toward blessing. Turning toward love.

Of course, what we hope is that these small ways of turning can open our hearts and our imaginations to other ways of turning toward what is good, life-giving, connection-making, and Christ-like throughout the season.

We wish you all a blessed Lent. Repent and believe the good news. And see what happens.

Resources:

Carter Heyward, *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*

articles on Mark 1:9-15 in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 2*

