

March 5, 2006/First Sunday of Lent/David L. Edwards

Jesus' Temptation and Ours

Psalm 25:1-10 *Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation,
for you I wait all day long.*

Mark 1:9-15 *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.*

Mark tells three significant stories of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, using very few words. Jesus' baptism. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God. Matthew and Luke later expanded these stories. But I like Mark's style. No explanations. No interpretations. Much room is left for the imagination, for us to wonder about the meaning of the stories for us today, in our own lives.

We Share Jesus' Baptism and Blessing

Jesus is the special one of God. That is central to the story of his baptism. In him we see what it means when a human being, like us, submits his life entirely to God. Jesus is Son of God in this sense, the Messiah who brings salvation. Salvation means wholeness. And wholeness means being alive to our relationship with God and living out of that relationship.

God's words to Jesus are also to us—You are my child, the beloved; I am very pleased with you. They are words spoken to us at the beginning of our journey of faith and all along the way. Baptism is the expression of this. We go into the water—or water is poured over us—as a sign of God's grace and of our desire to love God with our whole being. We come out of the water with a blessing. We need this blessing and spirit because life has a way of making us forget that we are blessed, that our true nature is communion with God.

I have seen this many times as I baptized children. They approach their baptism with eagerness and simple belief in what they were told about God's forgiveness and love, about the blessing of God's spirit. Their desire to follow Jesus is so sincere. They are not yet so muddled up with all the baggage we adults tend to accumulate. As they enter the water of the baptistery, they visibly tremble with anticipation, but also perhaps because the water is never as warm as I promise them it will be. They come up from the water, hair and face dripping, with an indescribable yet discernable change in their faces. They experience the blessing, the newness. And I pray that as they go through life, with all its challenges, they will never forget that they are baptized, that they belong to God and bear God's blessing, that they will remember to touch that blessing in difficult times.

We share the same blessing God spoke to Jesus—you are my child; I am pleased with you. Our lives are grounded in who we really are—those whom God has made and pronounced good, whether we feel like it or not! It is the objective reality of our lives, the firm ground that is always under us or within us, which we can touch again and again throughout our lives.

We Share Jesus' Temptation

Over the years I've talked with persons for whom faith has begun to change from something habitual and superficial—i.e. church membership—to a LIFE of faith. Faith moves from the head to the heart and the life of deepening commitment and spiritual growth. Usually it begins when the person has experienced for the first time in a real way what it means that God loves them deeply and completely, just as they are. God is no longer an idea or concept, but a Power of Love. There arises, in response, a desire to cultivate a life of prayer, serious study of scripture, a more deliberate love for others, and a seeking of what one is being called to give and to do for God and God's world.

However, the exhilaration of this new journey has begun to come up against the reality of choices, priorities, making decisions increasingly on the basis of what it means for them to follow Jesus. So this person comes in, sits down, and says with a sigh: I didn't think it was going to be so hard! And yet, even this is expressed with the sense of being involved in something that really matters, that has to do with the deepest meaning of life. There is a new understanding that what is most precious and important in life is not won without struggles. There are challenges. There are testings.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is "driven" by God's spirit out into the wilderness. There Jesus is tested, or tempted, by Satan. Jesus doesn't come out of the water of baptism marching from victory unto victory. God leads him straightway out into the wilderness, the place where comforts and distractions recede and one is alone. The relationship of blessing is now to be challenged. Now Jesus must choose this identity, decide to be who God has called him to be in the face of challenges.

A word about Satan. In scripture, testing is Satan's job. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Satan is a member of God's heavenly council. In the Book of Job, Satan is given the job of going to earth and testing Job's faith. There is an understanding here that faith and testing go together. Trust in God and living out of our relationship with God needs moments of challenge, when we must choose that relationship for ourselves in the face of things that would lure us away from it. What Jesus goes through is a familiar and an important part of the life of faith.

Mark doesn't tell us what the particular temptations were. Matthew and Luke expand the story to talk about temptations to grasp worldly power or prestige or to make God prove the promise to care for us. Mark leaves it

open. We are free to look at the internal and external things in our own lives that would lure us away from the life of blessing, the life of single-minded and single-hearted devotion to God, the life of trust in God's guidance, care, and wisdom.

Instead of getting hung up on whether or not we believe in Satan, it is more fruitful to think about what IS real for us. What are the things about life these days that challenge our groundedness in God, that would lure us into false values and goals? What are the things that each day offer us enticements to forget who we are as God's beloved daughters and sons? What mentalities dominate our society that try to convince us that violence or greed or self-interest really are the best ways to go?

No one who takes the life of faith seriously, who really decides to live as God's beloved child, will deny that following the high points of commitment and resolve come times of testing. No sooner do we say, Yes, I will live the life of love, than we meet someone who irritates the tar out of us! No sooner do we say, Yes, I will devote time each day to silence and prayer, than the Tempter says, Oh, but isn't that introspection selfish? Shouldn't you be up and doing, filling your life with actions instead of just sitting there? No sooner do we say, Yes, I commit myself to this call to use my gifts in this particular mission, than other things come along to distract us and cause us to lose focus and flee from commitment. Testing is the way we are strengthened and deepened and focused so that we truly come alive. Testing is the way we are enabled to identify and let go of the resistances in us to complete trust in God.

Two little details in Mark's story. Jesus is out in the wilderness with the wild animals and the angels wait on him. I don't think Mark meant that Jesus was out there surrounded by snarling lions and poisonous snakes poised to strike. I think it is likely that Mark means that the wild animals are "subject and friendly to" Jesus (D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*). In Isaiah 11, the kingdom of God or the messianic age is pictured this way:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

Mark may well have meant for us to remember that picture from Isaiah and see Jesus himself as the little child in the midst of the wild animals who do not harm him. In the midst of testing, Jesus is already in the kingdom of God, God's realm of peace. And so are we. To reinforce this, Mark follows with the statement that God's angels, God's messengers, waited on or served Jesus in his time of testing. Regardless of the severity of the challenges the life of faith meets, God is continually with us, serving and caring for us. And we are already in God's kingdom.

We Share Jesus' Mission

Jesus comes out of the wilderness with the message of the good news: God's kingdom, God's reign over life, has drawn near. It is at the door. The time is right. Repent, and believe in this good news. Jesus is focused on his mission of announcing God's in-breaking reign and calling people to repentance. Repentance means literally changing our minds. Or coming to our senses. Or waking up from all the illusions that have cast their spells over our minds and lives.

So this third brief story leads us to contemplate our own response to the nearness of God's realm, God's new day for the world. Where do we need to wake up? Where do our minds need changing so that we think new thoughts, so that we think as people of God's realm? Where do our imaginations need to be awakened so that we begin to see ourselves, other people, and the world around us through the lens of God's dream for life, God's kingdom?

Repentance and believing this good news of God's dawning reign means reorienting our lives. It means converting our lives into channels of God's coming into the world. This is not an instantaneous thing. It doesn't happen all at once. That's why we talk about a journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions. It is step by step, bit by bit. There are things about us that will take many years of prayer, reflection, and God's grace to be transformed. But that is all right. We need patience with as well as awareness of the things we want to change. It is a matter of learning the spiritual art of allowing God's kingdom to dawn in our lives, first here and then there.

Jesus comes out of his time of testing with deepened and clarified focus on God's call in his life and his mission. When we have committed ourselves to what we believe God has called us to do, we will encounter times of discouragement, opposition, things not going the way we imagined they would. But if we move through those times of testing, open to God's presence and comfort, then we come out with greater focus and commitment to what God has called us to be and do in the world, and greater trust in God's power to accomplish it.