

Loved, Tested, Sent

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 in brief style three important stories of the beginning of Jesus' ministry--Jesus' baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, and his mission of proclaiming of the kingdom of God. Matthew and Luke found it necessary for their purposes to expand the stories that Mark tells with such brevity. I have always had a preference for Mark's gospel. The fewer the words, the more room for us to reflect on and wonder about the meaning of these stories in our own lives today.

We Share Jesus' Baptism and Blessing

Jesus is the special one of God. That is the heart of the baptism story. In him we see what it means when a human being, like us, submits his life entirely to God. In this sense, Jesus opens the way of salvation for us. Salvation means wholeness, healing. It means being fully alive to our relationship with God and living out of that relationship. For the psalmist, knowing and living in God's ways is the path of salvation, wholeness, healing: "Teach me your ways, O Lord. Lead me in your truth." For us, Jesus is the one who teaches and leads us in, and embodies, those ways of true living.

What God says to Jesus, God says to each of us: You are my child, the beloved; I am very pleased with you. These 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 the God who made us is pleased with us. I think there is a general rule about life: When we don't experience ourselves as blessed, as beloved, we act badly. Someone who is always defensive or hurtful is usually someone who has a voice in her or his head saying—You are not good enough, smart enough, successful enough, pretty enough, spiritual enough, and on and on. That voice comes from someone--a teacher, a parent, a sibling, a minister, or some other significant person. Or it may come from our culture which puts such a premium on values that don't matter much in the end.

One of my greatest joys has been baptizing children. For the most part, children approach their baptism with eagerness, seriousness, and simple belief in what they are told about God's forgiveness and love and blessing. They are not yet so muddled up with all the baggage we adults accumulate through the years. As they enter the water of the baptistery, they sometimes visibly tremble with anticipation (but also perhaps because the water is never as warm as was promised!). They come up from the water, hair and face dripping, with an indescribable yet discernable change in their faces. I have heard a number of adults say that when they saw a child come up out of the water and walk out of the baptistery, the child looked somehow different, had a kind of glow. Maybe this is what the child was experiencing inwardly, and it showed outwardly. Maybe we were seeing the child as she or he truly is—one of God's beloved. I always prayed that as they go through life, with all its challenges and hurts and so forth, they would never forget that they are baptized, that they belong to God and bear God's blessing forever, and 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 which we can touch again and again throughout our lives. Our spiritual work, the inward journey we talk about, is, I think, really a devotion to discovering, rediscovering, or recovering the reality of our essential being—we are God's children, the beloved; God is pleased with us. For some, it takes a lifetime because experiences of hurt or loss or trauma of some kind have robbed them of that deepest knowledge about themselves. For all of us, living in this world presents daily challenges to that knowledge of our belovedness. We need the daily work of an intentional spiritual life. The blessing is always there to be touched, and we will touch it if we faithfully work with our inward journey, the journey to the truth of our own being.

We Share Jesus' Temptation

Over the years I've talked with a good number of 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, from holding religious ideas to a 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 Unconditional 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's world.

However, the exhilaration of this new journey begins to come up against the reality of choices, priorities, making decisions increasingly on the basis of what it means 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. The life of blessing, of being God's beloved and living like it, is something to be chosen again and again. It comes up against the challenging experiences of life. We finally arrive at the insight that we are indeed God's beloved, that we are pleasing to God. What a joy! Then the next moment we encounter someone who acts like a jerk or find ourselves with someone we really can't stand to be around. Or we gain the insight that we and all other people on earth are the beloved children of God, and suddenly the truly terrible nature of war and injustice takes on a new and more painful clarity. What do we do then? How do we live out our belovedness within the realities of life? That's where the story of Jesus' temptation, or testing, comes in.

Immediately after the high point of his baptism, Jesus is "driven" by God's spirit out into the wilderness to be tested. Jesus doesn't come out of the water of baptism marching from victory unto victory. God throws him straight 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, 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 choose that relationship for ourselves in the face of things that would distract us from it. What Jesus goes through is a familiar and an important part of the life of faith. All major religious traditions recognize the importance of testing, or temptation, in the deepening 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 demonstrate proof of God's care. 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 and 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 insight, 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. Testing is simply the way that being one whom God loves becomes real in our lives.

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 ready 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. Instead of trying to avoid difficult experiences, or testings, we can touch the kingdom of God in the midst of them.

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 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—not ours—to accomplish it.