

# The Temptation

## Mark 1:9-15

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

What are you tempted by? Is it food, money, your house, your children, your job, your position, your social status, your relationships, your fraternal affiliations, your power, your authority, your privilege, your nationality, and does your list include things that I have not listed?

If your temptation is food: do you need to eat in the finest restaurants in each city you visit? There are entire television networks dedicated to this temptation.

If your temptation is money: there are countless people and institutions to help you sort through your finances. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) even has a general unit devoted to helping you pass on your wealth to the next generation. And, if you don't already have enough money, the state of Michigan allows you to bet on all sporting events, as Sandy pointed out last Sunday.

If your temptation is your house: you can spend all your time and money on home improvement. At Home, Lowes, Home Depot will teach you how it is done.

If your temptation is your children: Dr. Spock and countless other can give your advice on how care for them when they are young; and you can spend all your time and energy worrying about their health, finances and relationships.

If your temptation is your job: most of spend or have spent 40 to 60 hours a week are more in this activity for many years. It almost defines who we are.

If your temptation is your position: How many people do you supervise or influence?

If your temptation is your social status: what clubs, associations, and people of influence do you know?

If your temptation is your relationships: "6 degrees of separation." On the public television program *Finding your Roots*, they learn of some of their famous cousins and other relatives.

If your temptation is your fraternal affiliation: do you belong to the same fraternity or sorority as some famous or influential person in the public arena?

If your temptation is your power: how many people are required to obey your orders?

If your temptation is your authority: how many people look to you for guidance?

If your temptation is privilege: do people automatically give you preference. I was listening to Cardinal Gregory of Washington, DC in an interview this week. He told of an incident where he was at a country club and a man asked him to put his golf clubs into a cart. He had to explain that he was there as a golfer, not an employee. He explained that without his clerical attire, he is mistaken for someone in a menial role.

If your temptation is your nationality: we are proud to be American and of the opportunities this opens for those who are willing to work hard and smart.

All of these can be good, but all come as potential temptations and can be abused. Jesus found this so. Satan asked him to use his power and authority for self-gratification and to short-circuit his mission and ministry. According to Matthew and Luke, Satan asked Jesus to turn stones to bread, show he could be ministered to by angels, and have power and authority over nations. But Satan wanted Jesus to do these things in Satan's way and time, rather than God's way and time.

Mark tells us the story in a different way. Mark tells of a rite of passage: the candidate is singled out (vv. 10–11), then taken for a proverbial length of time into a liminal space where old identities dissolve and new ones are forged (vv. 12–13), before being thrust back into society to occupy new roles (vv. 14–15). By contrast with Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel does not detail the ordeals to which the candidate is subjected. We are told only that Jesus was tempted by Satan, that he was with the wild beasts, and that the angels waited on him (v. 13). Certainly, Mark is observing the ancient convention still honored in fraternity hazing's: these are secrets known only to those who have already been initiated!

More importantly, Mark is using this stark story to preview the rest of the Gospel, in which Jesus is the wild beast who refuses to be domesticated into the household of conventional religion. Jesus' disruptive taboo-violating ministry of

touching lepers and bleeding women, of healing on the Sabbath, of eating with tax collectors and sinners, turns his earthly career into an example what God's reign is like. We are shown how—like children refusing to become adults—the scribes and Pharisees and even the twelve disciples resist the transition by refusing to let go of their old identities. But this story is not just able them and their own emergencies but forces us into a rite of passage to struggle through the tensions of holding on and letting go. You see that list we talked about earlier may be holding us back from who are called to be.

This is exactly where we belong on the first Sunday of Lent. But if many Gospel characters show us how not to respond, Jesus is the Master we are called to follow. We need to know how Jesus negotiated those forty days in the wilderness. Because Mark does not explicitly say, he puts us in the position of other members of society, left to guess what went on from what Jesus says and does afterwards. Because Mark does intend to provide guidance for our own transition, from outsider to child of God; he has to fill his subsequent narrative with sufficient clues to do that job.

The first comes in the Beelzebul controversy (3:22–30), which shows what the result of initiation ordeals must be. When Jesus strides into ministry casting out demons (1:21–28, 32–34), Jesus' enemies charge that he does it by Beelzebul's power (3:22). Jesus responds that it is impossible to plunder a strong man's house without first tying him up (3:27). The outcome of Jesus' temptations—of our own wrestling for kingdom identities—is not to be in pact with the powers of darkness. Rather, Satan must be bound! According to Matthew and Luke this was done through the Word of God.

The second clue articulates the shape of the vocation Satan is trying to talk Jesus out of. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus counters with the first prediction of his passion and resurrection. Peter rebukes

Jesus, and Jesus rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (8:29–33). Satan is trying to get Jesus to keep his eye on earthly advantage. Whatever else happens in the wilderness, Jesus lets go of human things and our list of temptation, and refuses to grasp ready-made savior roles. Instead, Jesus discerns a his calling by passing through the disastrously crucifixion over into the unimaginable resurrection life.

A third clue warns of the importance of spiritual wrestling. Mark’s Gospel implies that Jesus bound Satan at the beginning. But in the Gethsemane (14:32–42), Jesus struggles at the end. For three rounds, Jesus wrestles and prays: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (14:36). Then Jesus rises resolute and strides through his passion the way he earlier marched into ministry. By contrast, Peter’s confession is half-baked. Because he will not let go of it enough to enter into what Jesus is saying, Peter is quickly co-opted into speaking for Satan. Even at the transfiguration, which we examined last week, the inner circle of disciples is too hard-hearted and closed-minded to take in the meaning of either crucifixion or resurrection. The disciples fix their eyes on human greatness and their list of temptations all the way to Jerusalem. Because Peter does not submit his vocation to the test of prayer, but sleeps in the garden, he is unable to follow Jesus’ example. Peter yields to temptation in the courtyard and denies Jesus all three times.

The somber moral is that divine vocation is both amazing and dangerous. Up front, it signals divine favor as we are children of God (1:11; cf. 9:7). But divine vocation immediately thrusts us into odds with others and ourselves. Unless we are willing to let old identities dissolve, give up those things we think are so important, and allow ourselves to be reshaped into crucifixion-resurrection disciples, our sense of divine vocation is fraught with demonic potential. In Mark’s Gospel, the

experience of Jesus' first disciples stands as a warning: because the Twelve could not loosen their grip on their stuff in advance, Golgotha became the liminal space where their old meanings crashed and burned, leaving them no choice but to despair or to beg for new ones.

Implicitly, Mark's Gospel also makes Lent the norm for Christian life. However it may have been for Jesus, resolution for us and giving up our stuff cannot be "once and for all" immediate, but a matter of surrendering our imperfect conceptions and wrestling for God's meaning afresh every day. These spiritual gymnastics strengthen us for major trials by deepening our acquaintance with the God who calls us. Things may go so badly for us that we lose sight of divine favor. Jesus' regular prayed experience of divine favor enabled him to remain resolute.

### **Marilyn McCord Adams**

Especially during the season of Lent, shall we not also then be prepared to bear the cost of our divine name and mission as Jesus' disciples, in the confident hope of our ultimate divine affirmation in the resurrection power and love of God? "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (says the apostle Paul). "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:14, 15c–17). **Rodney J. Hunter**

As Jesus was tempted, so we will be; but as we seek God's will in prayer and study of God's holy scripture, we will be given strength to endure all temptations.