

Psalm 25:1-10  
Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday of Lent  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
February 18, 2018

## **Testing in the Wilderness**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm for this First Sunday in Lent is a prayer for guidance and protection. Repeated references to God's "ways" and "paths" can remind us of the road that is Lent. Our brief and fleeting life is set over against the abiding mercy and steadfast love of God—the teacher and loving guide. Listen to these words from Psalm 25:1-10...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

A lot happens in the seven verses of our Gospel Lesson for today. Jesus appears for the first time and is baptized by John in the Jordan River. The Spirit descends on Jesus, a voice from heaven is heard, and the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where he is tested. John the Baptist is arrested. And Jesus begins his ministry. Listen to these words from Mark 1:9-15...

### *Sermon*

The baptism of Jesus provided clear affirmation that he was the unique Son of God, and that it was time for his public ministry to begin.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” (Mark1:15a)

We do not know whether Jesus had any anguish or any doubt before taking this leap of faith. Considering that he was fully human, as well as fully divine, we can assume that he did. We do know of his anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane before taking that final step of drinking the cup of suffering and death upon a cross.

According to William Barclay, this was a time of *decision*. For thirty years Jesus had stayed in Nazareth, faithfully doing his work and discharging the duties of his home. For years the Carpenter must have contemplated his ultimate work, his identity, his mission. Now with the appearance of John the Baptist it was time for decision. In the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Joshua, Joshua tells the people of Israel that it's time for them to make a decision. They would have to choose whether they would obey the Lord who had proven his trustworthiness, or the local gods, which were only man-made idols.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (24:15)

In every life there come moments of decision. In 1845 James Russell Lowell wrote a poem entitled, "The Present Crisis," which was later set to music as a hymn by Thomas J. Williams. The first verse says,

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, some new decision, offering each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever twixt that darkness and that light.  
(“Once to Every Man and Nation)

Jesus believed that when John the Baptist emerged in the wilderness, it was the time of decision and action. Nazareth may have been home, sweet home, but now he will answer the call of God to leave home and begin to fulfill the ultimate purpose of his life—to bring near the kingdom of God, and to draw men and women into that kingdom.

Not only was this a time of decision, it was also a time of *identification*. John the Baptist had started a movement of people back to God. And while Jesus was without sin, through baptism he wanted to identify himself with this movement.

The baptism of Jesus indicated *decision* and *identification*. And it also revealed *God's approval, God's blessing*. In the time of Jesus people spoke of what they called the *Bath Qol*, which means "the daughter of a voice." Many people believed in a series of heavens, in the highest of which sat God, in the light to which no person could approach. There were rare times when the heavens opened and God spoke; but to them, God was so distant that it was only the far away echo of the voice of God that was heard. But to Jesus the voice of God came completely and directly. As Mark tells the story, it was a personal experience in which God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." So in baptism Jesus submitted his decision to God, and that decision was ratified in an unmistakable way.

In the Greek the vision is even more vivid. For it actually speaks of the heavens being ripped apart as Jesus came up out of the water, and the verb is the same which was later used of the curtain of the temple being "torn in two from top to bottom" when Jesus died. (Mark 15:38) In both cases, what had long been sealed is suddenly flung open. Jesus' ministry answers the long-deferred hope expressed in Isaiah:

Then they remembered the days of old,  
of Moses his servant.  
Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea  
with the shepherds of his flock?  
Where is the one who put within them  
his holy spirit. (63:11)  
...  
O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would quake at your presence. (64:1)

Others will discover the truth about who Jesus is by listening to what he says and by watching what he does. Like the centurion who watches Jesus die at the end of Mark's gospel and confesses publicly what is revealed here privately: "Truly, this man was the Son of God." (15:39b)

With these words of affirmation, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” we might well expect that the next verses in Mark’s story will report that Jesus immediately began preaching, teaching, and healing with great success, to the acclaim of the multitudes. But Mark says no such thing. Instead, he reports that Jesus is immediately dispatched to the wilderness for a forty-day bout with evil. Thus begins Jesus’ battle with the powers of darkness.

It was like the Hebrew people, having finally escaped slavery in Egypt with the precarious crossing of the Red Sea, then looking around and finding themselves wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Like Abraham being tested in the sacrifice of Isaac. It was like Peter and James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration and seeing the curtain pulled back and for one bright shining moment beholding the glory of Christ, and then having to go back down the mountain to face sick people in the valley.

But isn’t this our own experience? A person joins the church and begins a life of discipleship. But then comes doubt and wondering. “Is this really the right way for me?” When often we have made a breakthrough by a fresh resolve, thinking the struggle is now past, the decision is clear, and the path ahead will be smooth and easy; we instead find ourselves in unexpected and disrupting wilderness. We’re done with all that junk food, lack of exercise, video games, and anxious worry. Only to find a few weeks later that we’re not as done as we imagined.

Psalms 25 reminds us that our struggle against enemies involves a sustained process over time—a process of hearing and appropriating the teaching of the Lord. It’s not finished after 40 days, or even 40 years.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long. (Ps. 25:4-5)

Now if we are startled to find Jesus moving from the exalted moment of baptism to the torment of wilderness testing, there is something even more unexpected in Mark's account: It was the Spirit that drove him there. What seems to us a contradiction of the exalting moment of baptism is, in God's perspective, a continuation of it. The Spirit who blessed at the Red Sea and at the River Jordan also blesses in the wilderness. It was in the wilderness, as Matthew and Luke tell us, that Jesus made resolute confirmation of God's intention for his life. When the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, Jesus did not seek a way out or complain about the unfairness of this time. How he had done nothing to deserve this. Had he skipped the testing in the wilderness and moved immediately from baptism to a successful ministry of preaching and teaching and healing, Jesus would have known less well the full meaning of his baptism, and he would have carried less focus and resource into his ministry.

The rainbow of Genesis 9 promised nothing except as part of the devastating experience of the flood. The Hebrew people forged their identity as a people in the rigors of forty years in the wilderness. It was from Sinai that they could look back to the Passover and the Exodus with new meaning. It was from Sinai that they could at last move into the Promised Land with confidence. Temptation understood as testing is part of the way God teaches us.

The meaning of goals we aspire to but seem to find thwarted, is far more than we can imagine until after we go through our own testing in the wilderness. Some of the unexpected and unwanted difficulties of change and adjusting to the realities of getting older may be the testing

of the Spirit. And they may enrich our understanding of our own aspirations and our own capacity to make the most of them.

But let us not forget this gospel truth: Jesus was not alone in the wilderness. There was the reality of evil, of a demonic force, to be sure. But the Spirit was with him and the angels ministered to him.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

To be able to see certain trials as gifts, we need to make just the surrender that baptism symbolizes. We need to surrender our fear, our pride, our sense that we can and must always be in control of every aspect of our lives, and always define anything that impedes us as without purpose. We need to be as open as the pilgrimage of Lent can make us to the new things that God has in mind for us, not only as individuals, but also as a church.

However, this surrender is also surrender to affirmation. Jesus prevailed in the wilderness and returned from it strengthened, not only because of the Holy Spirit and the angels who ministered to him, but also because he went in knowing himself to be God's beloved Son. And we can know our portion of that blessing as well, when we claim *our* baptismal identity: a child of God, a member of God's family, a sheep of the flock. If we can see the wilderness of Lent as a time for decision and commitment, for reclaiming our own identity, and allowing God and his angels to minister to us, this will indeed be a teachable moment, a sacred Lenten journey. Amen. Let it be!