

“Day By Day”

The Gospel of Mark is like the movie *Ground Hog Day*: every weekend we come back to church and it's the same thing all over again. Last week it almost seemed as though we were breaking out, with a little vacation to Mark 9 and the story of the transfiguration. But today here we are again in chapter 1, right back where we started after Christmas with the baptism of Jesus. “Rise and shine, campers, and don't forget your booties 'cause it's cold out there today.” “It's cold out there every day. What do you think this is, Miami Beach?”

We're back to chapter 1 because it contains the story of the temptation of Jesus, traditional fare for the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is the period of forty days (not counting Sundays) during which we prepare for the most important day of the Christian year, Easter Sunday. Lent is sort of like spring training for Christians. The name comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for the lengthening of days; so it has optimistic origins. But Lent is traditionally a drab and inhospitable time.

Lent is a season of introspection that is fraught with spiritual peril. It often entails self-denial, self-examination, self-deprecation and all too often self-absorption. Some folks get pretty theatrical about giving things up for Lent. Every time we eschew something that probably wasn't any good for us in the first place we think of the sacrifices of Christ; but every time we think of the sacrifices of Christ a part of us is also admiring ourselves for such lofty remembrance. Lent admirably aims at making faith deeply personal, which is good; but sometimes ends up making it entirely individual, which is not so good.

A helpful place to start is with the scripture lesson, which describes Jesus' wrestling with temptation. Characteristic of Mark, the temptation account is so brief that in order to get a decent reading out of it we include material all around it. That can help us escape the trap of talking all day about what Mark does not say.

The reading begins with Jesus' baptism. This is the first we hear of Jesus in the gospel. There is no birth story and no buildup; he simply appears to be baptized by John. This raises all sorts of issues that the other gospels deal with, such as why would someone supposedly sinless submit to

a baptism of repentance. Mark doesn't go there. Instead he focuses on Jesus' experience. Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and he hears a voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

There's a powerful affirmation here, and that's good. But it is also altogether possible that these words are disturbing, much in the manner of a parent saying to a very conscientious child, "You've never let me down. I *know* you'll do the right thing." No pressure, right? We read that the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.

What's going on here?

One possibility is that God's declaration of Jesus as "my Son, the Beloved" at least at some level comes as news to Jesus; that the possibility of the very special role he is to play is just beginning to dawn on him. "Beloved Son:" wouldn't it be more comfortable to be a favorite nephew? Any student of Jewish history would know that being chosen by God is never a prelude to a contented and well-adjusted life. Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, perhaps half by compulsion and half in flight.

If this is a crisis of faith, Mark is stingy with the details. Matthew and Luke will rush to fill in the blanks, recounting conversations between Jesus and Satan that amount to temptations to rule the world the way Rome rules: through bread and circuses and legions. Matthew and Luke tell us that these forty days are a time of fasting. But Mark doesn't say so. Jesus is in the wilderness, the place where Israel was tested and revealed in the Exodus. He is tempted by Satan, without elaboration. He is with the wild beasts, which provide a dual image of danger and proof that something at least can subsist in the wilderness. And Mark tells us that the angels "waited on" Jesus. The word is *diakonia*, from which we get our word, Deacon. In Mark's take on things, Deacons are angels, and not to be confused with wild beasts. That's sort of the way it is around here, too.

Apart from this, Mark tells us nothing about what happened to Jesus in the wilderness. But Mark does tell us the end result of this time: Jesus emerges with a mission and a message.

"The time is fulfilled," he announces. The time we've been waiting for is now. "The Kingdom of God has come near": the Reign of God is at hand, is among us and within us. "Repent, and believe the good news": come to a new way of living for this new time and this new reality. Believe and trust in the Reign of God. That's the message with which Jesus emerges from his time in the wilderness.

But notice what this message is not. It is not the Mighty Mouse message: “Here I come to save the day.” The Kingdom of God is the message, and Jesus’ vocation is focused entirely on the message. He will proceed to share this good news in deeds more than in words. As St. Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.” The message is not, “I am God’s Son. Believe in me. Trust in me: me, me, me.” Jesus emerges from his time of temptation focused on his mission and his message. These forty days are essential to the crystal clarity of his ministry.

And what of our forty days? I see a lot of parallels. Each of us has been claimed by God in baptism, affirmed as a beloved child of God. We are called to ministries that embody the love of God, using our various gifts to underscore the message. And each of us is ambivalent about that calling, unsure sometimes about how best to respond, or even whether we want to respond at all. We would rather believe the consumer siren song that sounds all around us: you belong to yourself, things will make you happy and you deserve to be happy; you are a pattern of consumption: by consuming you create yourself and achieve fulfillment. I know: it sounds stupid when you say it out loud like that, which is why nobody ever does.

If Lent is our time to consider our vocation—not in the sense of what we do to make money but in the sense of who God has called us to be—then Lent is the time for us to wrestle with the question, what does it mean to be called by God to embody the Good News? What is the message of God’s love that the world needs? What is my peculiar and wonderful way of embodying that message? How can we, individually and collectively, be instruments of that message?

In this sense Lent is not so much a time to focus on our shortcomings as it is a time to reflect on our possibilities. We don’t do it in a vacuum, to be sure. There are wild beasts all around us, too. But there are angels, as well, as the Deacons will remind us in just a few minutes; angels who minister to us in the name of Christ, reminding us that God sustains us in this important work.

The real meaning of Lent, in preparing us for Easter, is to bring us to the point of rebirth. To be sure, that means letting go of some things, being less willing to be defined by externals, giving up on measuring our worth in terms of success or worldly achievement, more eager to receive the gift of life that God gives. That’s the work before us, the work for which God gives us our daily bread, day by day.

For the story of Jesus is also our story. We are beloved of God. We are called and chosen. In the wilderness we consider what it means to serve. Come to the table to begin this important work, to remember who and whose we are.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

4126 Ingersoll Avenue

Des Moines, Iowa 50312

(515) 255-3149

Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM

Fax: 515-255-8667

E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com