

Lent C1 2016
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
David Noble
“Tested”

Mark 1.9-13

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

1.

Jesus’ life changed dramatically that day. He walked across the desert wilderness to what was becoming a popular, if unusual, destination. John the Baptist had taken up residence by a little stream in the desert where more and more people from the cities were gathering to see him and hear him. John was preaching repentance, urging people to turn their lives around, to trust in God. And to this end he was baptizing these people, leading them into the little stream where they laid back under the water, as if allowing the current to wash away their sinfulness. He called this a baptism of forgiveness.

Jesus joined the crowd that had gathered that day to hear John preach. He got into line with all the others to be baptized. He wanted to stand with all those who need forgiveness. He too went down into the water, but when he came up there was a dramatic difference. He heard the voice of God naming him “Son”, calling him “Beloved”, praising him as one who deeply pleased God.

The drama intensifies as the heavens are torn apart, ripped open, and the Spirit of God comes down on Jesus, like a dove, it says. Like a dove.

You may have in mind the dove of peace, the kind of bird that is released at wedding ceremonies or other gatherings where people express hope and mercy. But the dove is really quite different. Doves are among the strongest fliers of all birds. Their powerful wings can propel them at up to 55 miles per hour and they are highly maneuverable. They dart and swoop in spiraling dives with their wings making a strange whistling sound.

While we may sentimentalize the story of Jesus’ baptism, seeing the Holy Spirit gently settling down on to Jesus, perhaps it is more appropriate to see that Spirit swooping down on him, claiming him, targeting him, after which the same powerful Spirit drives him into the wilderness. In the wilderness, Mark’s gospel says, Satan will tempt him.

Mark’s gospel doesn’t give us much to go on here. We don’t get any details on what it means for Jesus to be tempted in the desert by Satan. Let’s not let the terminology trip us up. Satan means “adversary.” He doesn’t have to be a personal being dressed in a red suit carrying a pitchfork. Satan, for me, is in the whispers I hear, urging me to take care of myself at the expense of others, or assuring me that God’s love isn’t practical when it comes right down to it.

In addition, the word “tempted” is only part of what Mark means. The word also means “tested.” Jesus was pushed by God into the wilderness where he would be tested, where he could choose Satan’s way by using his power to obliterate his enemies and win the world, or choose God’s way by using God’s love to conquer people even if it meant him ending up on a cross.

2.

We also know what it means to be tempted and tested. Perhaps the greatest time of temptation is when we are college-aged, on the verge of becoming adults. We have the freedom to make choices and slim experience on which to base our decisions. And at that age we are especially daring with a sense of invulnerability. A powerful concoction, a precarious time.

But temptations don’t end there. Almost anything can tempt us to devotion, to giving our life over to it, to wanting more and more of it to the point that we lose touch with ourselves, our world, our God. We just want more and more of whatever it is that has seized us.

When we come to the waters of baptism, we too are named and claimed by God. At baptism we recognize that the Holy Spirit is swooping into our lives. Sometimes we think that’s the end of the story—we’ve been taken up by God, we’ve been saved, and now it’s just waiting out the days until we join God in heaven for ever.

But that Spirit that dives into our hearts and minds is commissioning us for service. Baptism isn’t the end, it’s the beginning. And the Spirit drives us out into the world where we are tested like Jesus. I don’t believe God tempts us but I do believe the Holy Spirit places us into situations that stretch us, that demand we make a choice on what path we will take, what kind of life we will live, what sort of values we will embrace.

God leads us into careers where relationships test us and maybe even the business model tests us. If we are surrounded by dishonesty can we be honest? If we are immersed in power that dominates people, can we subvert that power to free people? Maybe we are tested in family relationships. I myself come from a family that was split, so that brothers and sisters in my mother’s generation did not talk to each other. Such dynamics test the limits of our love and grace. Maybe we are blessed with wealth and prosperity and we are tested to share it generously. With baptism the Holy Spirit pushes us out into the world where we are tested, just like Jesus was.

Thomas Are, a Presbyterian pastor in Kansas, says that “the wilderness is anywhere the teaching of Jesus seems foolish and other voices seem reasonable.” We hear Jesus say “blessed are the poor,” but are attracted instead to those who promise abundance. Jesus says, “pray for your enemies,” but others tell us to be afraid and to strike first. Jesus says, “Lose your life for my sake and you will find it,” while the consumer message is to find your life before you lose it.

We know the wilderness. We are being tested.

3.

How did Jesus handle his testing?

Remember the picture of Jesus’ baptism? He came up from the water heard his name, “Son.” God called him son. And beloved. Jesus was loved, empowered, and as a son he inherited a love for God’s people,

his people. And so when he was tested he knew the tests were not to judge him, not to trick him or make him fail. He was already worthy, he was God's son, God's beloved.

And as Jesus emerged from the baptismal water the heavens were torn apart, ripped open. It's one thing, let's say, to cut a piece of paper in two, you can repair the cut with something like tape to hold it together. But when you rip something apart there's no fixing it. The heavens were ripped apart, Mark says, heaven invaded earth that day and it's never been the same. Jesus was not alone in his testing. God was loose in the world, and that's both frightening and promising.

As the heavens were ripped open the Spirit swooped down like a dove. Not "on" Jesus, but "into" Jesus. The Greek word here really means "into." When Jesus endured the tests of Satan he did so with the Holy Spirit not only driving him into the world but sustaining him and guiding him and strengthening him from the inside out.

The way Mark tells this story of Jesus' baptism and 40 days of testing is meant to bring to mind the old story of the Israelites and their 40 years in the wilderness. They escaped Egypt with Moses as their leader. God parted the sea, the wicked Pharaoh and his army were left behind, and the people of God streamed into the wilderness, into freedom. For a while they were content. But before long they faced hunger and thirst and idolatry and many other tests.

Moses said, "Don't forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good." The testing of Jesus was to do good, to strengthen him for the journey ahead.

4.

I know we have some sports enthusiasts in this congregation. We have some soccer fanatics and we have a dancer who is working hard as well. All of you belong to teams who share your enthusiasm. I'm sure each of you has been challenged to go from the third team to second team and the second team to the first team. And it was hard. Your coaches and instructors were testing you to see if you could grow and develop and learn and mature.

When we are baptized, we become sons and daughters of God. We are called beloved and God is delighted with our baptism. The Spirit swoops into our lives and drives us out into the world to minister in the name of Christ, to be tested, and to be strengthened in our trust for God and our commitment to love and mercy.

You are confronted with tests and opportunities to grow. Remember you are beloved. Remember Jesus is in solidarity with you and you have brothers and sisters to support you. Remember the swooping Holy Spirit that entered into you to sustain you and strengthen you. God is with you, especially in the wilderness.