

**TAMING WILD BEASTS; MARK 1:9-15; MARCH 1, 2009; LENT ONE
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I'm acquiring a taste for the Gospel of Mark. I used to think Mark was just a minimalist version of Jesus' life without substance. Matthew, Luke and John are twice as long and offer stunning portrayals of Jesus: Matthew's Jesus as Moses; Luke's friend of outcasts; and John's Jesus a kind of Superman who reads minds and moves through walls.

Mark has always seemed to me like the *Cliff Notes* version of Jesus' life – a statement of the obvious. But I am re-evaluating my opinion. Mark *is* brief but so was the *Gettysburg Address*. Today's temptation in the wilderness is a good example – a mere five lines long while Matthew devotes thirty-five lines to the subject and Luke thirty-seven.

But in addition to brevity, Mark has his own distinctive take on the Messiah. Jesus labors more in the shadows or, perhaps, the shadow of the cross than in light and splendor. Mark is edgy. When Jesus performs miracles he tells his followers strangely not to tell anyone; and at the end of the story – the disciples experience Easter in terror – not as an inspiring and joy-filled reappearing.

Today's story reveals Mark's unique vision of Jesus. Rather than recording in detail his temptations and the long dialogue with Satan as Matthew and Luke do, all Mark says is "he remained in the desert forty days tempted by Satan."

Mark is more interested in the location of the wilderness as the place of temptation, than in the blow by blow account of the temptation itself. Israel was tempted and struggled with its faith for forty years *in the wilderness*. He is telling us something important about Jesus – Jesus was human, he struggled with *his faith* too.

But Mark is also telling us that it is in the wildernesses of life where we are tested. Rather than begin with long accounts of his special birth Mark begins with Jesus struggling with his faith and fidelity to God. He puts us on notice that Jesus' life and ministry will be lived in a spiritual combat zone. Danger lurks from the beginning. His brief ministry will be populated by evil spirits, demons and ultimately his suffering and death.

It reminds me of those signs at beaches after hours that say "swim at your own risk." Jesus enters the wilderness *at his own risk*, he begins his ministry *at his own risk*, he teaches and heals and engages the religious and political authorities *at his own risk*.

Martin Luther said when the word is rightly preached demons are loosed. What I like about that comment and Mark's telling us that Jesus' life begins and ends in temptation is the honesty about the daily battle we face between good and evil. Jesus risks his life fighting the forces of evil and he invites us to do the same.

It is much easier, or so it seems, to live in denial. To pretend that what ever it is that is killing us doesn't exist or isn't there; the veritable elephant in the room. In fact, if evil exists, if there are demons and dark spirits, they exist to have us ignore the truth; to downplay disease or injustice in a relationship or community or nation. But Jesus comes to confront the powers of darkness with truth which is one of the reasons for his great strength.

I would propose this morning that this ancient tale of temptation in a desert wilderness confronting Satan couldn't be more relevant to our modern world.

If it wasn't temptation and denial that led to the present fiscal crisis, the War in Iraq and the crumbling of so many systems from commerce and industry to the non-profit and religious sector, then what was it? One of the refreshing things about the new President is he seems to know we've been kidding ourselves. We haven't budgeted for the true expenses of the nation; we've not allowed open and full press coverage of the War; we've let ourselves believe it's OK to suspend our cherished human rights and freedoms because our enemies play by different rules.

I'm not saying the previous administration was all bad or that the current one is perfect. Nor are just Presidents worthy of praise or blame but the people who elect them. Self-deception and denial are always lurking.

Where does this leave us at the start of Lent? Perhaps a major deficit in American religion recently is that we have failed to take seriously our human frailty; many churchgoers today are in the grip of the Gospel of Prosperity and 'feel good religion.'

Civilizations have always ebbed and flowed. Even the best systems and institutions are human and therefore flawed. But that's the point, unless our politics and theology embody some degree of honesty and humility we'll be building more Towers of Babel.

I heard a Harvard Business School professor recently interviewed on NPR. He said not only are we questioning how to get a bank, a business, an economy working again; we are also asking – what is the *mission* of our banks, and businesses, and economy. Because so many of the fundamentals of business and the open market have been violated or ignored or stretched this professor claimed that our trust in the very mission of many of our institutions has eroded and needs rebuilding.

It would be foolhardy to walk into a future without taking stock of human nature, the reality of temptation, our capacity to deceive ourselves and rationalize away terminal symptoms and self-destructive behavior.

Lent has always been an appropriate time to probe such matters and consider biblical antidotes and spiritual practices to counter such thinking.

Genesis' promise, for example, to Abraham that by their conduct the Hebrew people would be a blessing to the entire human family; Jeremiah's "I will be your God and you will be my people and you will know me in your heart"; Micah's "what does the Lord require us but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God"; and Jesus who said, "if any one would be great that one must become the servant of all; if any want to gain their life they must lose it for my sake and for the Gospel."

It's the start of Lent: a good time to take a fearless, searching moral and spiritual inventory. A good time to move closer to a right relationship with God, our neighbor and the planet. A good time to re-point the bricks of our spiritual foundation one act, one relationship, one day at a time. So come to this table of humility and sacrifice; this table open to all people; this table where we dine today with new brothers and sisters in faith. Amen.