

BAPTISM, TEMPTATION AND THE MISSION OF GOD

TEXT: Mark 1:9-15

As a general rule, following the Lectionary readings usually gives us a pretty good running account of the life of Jesus from the Gospels. But, occasionally, it leaves a lot out. And that is true with our Scriptures from Mark for the beginning of Lent. Today we have a quick six verses that take us from Jesus' baptism by his cousin John, an even quicker forty days in the wilderness, and his announcement that "Here comes God's Kingdom". Baptism, temptation, and the mission of God – all in just ten sentences. So I hope you will forgive me if I borrow a bit from the Gospels of Mathew and Luke to fill in the blanks.

After all, this is some of the most important stuff in the life of Jesus. This is what leads us into the Season of Lent. This is what gives us the first glimpse of what Jesus is all about. We need a lot more information.

So, let's start at the beginning – with baptism. This is the beginning for most of us. Our baptism is our "official" entry into the body we call "the church". For most of us, as Methodists, this is accomplished at the request of our parents when we are yet babies. For others, it comes later and the decision to be baptized is made individually. For Jesus, it was the sign of the beginning of his ministry. As John dipped him in the waters of the Jordan River, God confirmed that ministry and acknowledged that "this is my Son, in whom I am pleased". I have always especially liked the translation that follows this by God telling the people (and, of course, telling us) "Listen to him!" Good advice, to be sure!

Then, just after his baptism with the glow of the descended Spirit still upon him, and the commanding voice of the Father still ringing in his ears, Jesus is rushed into the suffering of temptation.

Now, temptation can run a wide gamut. For us, temptation might be the one last piece of chocolate in the box. Or maybe we are tempted to feign a queezy stomach in order to skip that long, boring meeting that is on our schedule. We might even be tempted to duck so as to be unseen by someone that we would rather not meet. But these are small potatoes to what Jesus had to deal with.

Jesus was called from his baptism out into the wilderness, where he stayed for forty days. Yes, forty days of fasting, specifically from food. While he was tempted at other times throughout his lifetime on earth, this period of time emphasized how Jesus responded to temptation, both as an example to others as well as to reveal his ability to wrestle with temptation – and to overcome it.

Matthew and Luke record the first temptation as one involving food. After fasting for 40 days, Jesus was clearly hungry. Satan chose to tempt Jesus by telling him to turn stones into bread. Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Matthew then records that the devil took Jesus to the top of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and told him to jump off. Satan quoted the Old Testament passage that stated, “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone”. The idea was that Jesus would miraculously be rescued in public, revealing his great power to those watching. Again Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy, saying, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”. He knew that this would be a misuse of power and in direct violation of the mission God the Father had given him.

In the third temptation, “The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil then said he would give Jesus authority over all of these kingdoms if Jesus would worship him. Jesus refused, telling the devil to “Be gone”, quoting Deuteronomy a third time saying, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve”. The devil then left him and, according to the text, angels served him.

Many observations can be made about the meaning and purpose of Jesus' temptations in these passages. First, Jesus revealed his full humanity. He was hungry and he wrestled with temptation. He expressed feelings, thoughts and words as human typically do in tense situations.

Second, Jesus revealed his deity. His ability to resist temptation was clearly displayed as superior to other humans. He had strong knowledge of God's Word and even had the power to tell Satan to "Be gone". Jesus was tempted, yet remained sinless, proving himself divine.

Third, Jesus offered an example of dealing with temptation. During his struggles, he quoted God's Word, recognized the enemy's tricks, and emphasized worshiping God.

So, here we are today – the first Sunday in Lent, our introduction to this season of reflection. So I have been reflecting on just what the baptism and the temptations are telling us about the mission of God and what God was calling Jesus to do. The baptism, followed by his time in the wilderness, and the temptations must have been preparing Jesus to fulfill God's mission. I believe God was calling Jesus to bring true justice to the nations, to all people everywhere for all time, to help every one of us to come into a very real relationship with God.

Justice means, first of all, that relationship with God where justice is holiness and entering into relationship – into union with God – but it also means justice in the way that we're used to thinking of it: justice where everyone has a right and has opportunity to have a full human life. That's the right of every person, to share in all the goods that God has given to all and not to allow some to have very much and most to have almost nothing.

Jesus is supposed to bring about a change in the way material goods – the goods of the earth that God made for all – are shared by all. Also, he's not to do it by using power or force of violence. He does not shout or raise his voice. Proclamations are not

heard in the streets. The servant of God, the one in whom God delights, does not use force, violence or arms to bring about the changes that are needed. Instead, the servant is one who nurtures, one who loves.

The servant will not crush, but rather will nurture it gently, carefully, until it becomes whole again. The servant will not snuff out the light of the wavering wick, the tiny flame that is left in the embers. The servant will not snuff but rather, again, gently, carefully draw that tiny light into a fullness of flame. The servant is one who nurtures, who loves, who is gentle, and who rejects violence for any reason whatsoever.

But the devil is challenging Jesus to “change these stone into bread. You’re the Son of God. You can have all the wealth, all the material goods you want”. But Jesus says, “No, it’s not by bread alone that people live”.

We live in a world that is saturated with advertisements that constantly call upon us to get more, have more, get something new, something better. So we end up in what we call a consumer society – consumption. It’s almost like a disease that afflicts us, and we keep on wanting more. That’s why in the season of Lent we’re asked to discipline ourselves, do some penance, restrict what we accumulate, what we make use of; deprive ourselves so that we begin to understand that it’s not by bread alone that people live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And power – the devil wanted Jesus to worship him so that then Jesus could have all the kingdoms of the earth, all the armies, the military might – use whatever force you need to do what you want, to have that power. We live in a nation that is obsessed. We spend more on arms supposedly in self-defense, but rather for wars of aggression, than the next 14 nations in our world combined. We keep on manufacturing new so-called weapons, more destructive weapons, because we want power.

Why do we allow this to happen when Jesus tells his disciples that they need to follow him and his way? His way is what he learned at his baptism, and he began to pray

over and reflect on during those six weeks of prayer in the desert. It's exactly what the devil was trying to tempt him to give up. Those temptations of Jesus don't end; they go on in the church and in our country, where Jesus lives in each of us and in our whole community.

Even at the very end of the life of Jesus, the devil was tempting him. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. You don't have to be subject to ordinary human frailty and mortality." But Jesus rejected those temptations right up to the end, and he died on the cross without power, without wealth, and yet as he himself said, "I, when I am lifted up will draw all to myself, draw by love". Dying on the cross, he poured forth love on the world, on the universe, on all humanity.

Today's message is a powerful message. If we really look at what was happening there, those temptations in the desert, and see them in the context of Jesus just having been called by God to carry out a mission to transform our world through love – if we see this, we should reflect on it, and then try to follow the way of Jesus.

Spend time in prayer, especially quiet, reflective prayer, and reading the Scriptures, listening to the word of God. If all of us begin to do this, if we really take the word of God as the bread of life, if we really nurture it and nourish ourselves with the word of God, we will begin to be more closely united with Jesus, understand his way, and even more important, we'll have the courage to follow it.

The Scriptures reveal to us who Jesus really is, what his mission is, and what we must do to follow it, to carry out this mission to make the reign of God happen. Do not depend on bread alone, but every day listen to the word of God and keep it.