

Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Is it my imagination – or have we been here recently? It was just a couple months ago that we read part of this passage – the part dealing with the Baptism of Jesus – as part of our celebration of Epiphany Sunday. Today – as we stand on the brink of Lent – as we celebrate the first Sunday of the Lenten season – let us focus on the second part of this passage – the Temptation of Christ.

In today's passage Mark states that Jesus was DRIVEN by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. There, Mark just says Jesus was tempted for 40 days by Satan. Matthew and Luke on the other hand – give a much fuller description of this temptation – a description that actually includes dialogue between the Prince of Peace and the Prince of Lies. But in all of these gospels it is clear that the purpose of this wilderness experience – the purpose of the Holy Spirit Driving Jesus out there – is to have this encounter with Satan. It is something of a test if you will.

But that is ironic – for remember this occurs right after the glorious baptism scene. No sooner does Jesus arise from those waters... no sooner does the Spirit descend upon him like a dove ... no sooner did he hear that wonderful affirmation that he is the Beloved of God, then he is **driven** by that same spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of struggling - a wilderness experience of 40 days – to be among the wild beasts – to struggle with Satan. Imagine – from the high of that glorious baptism experience – then cast out into the wilderness.

Now we recognise the pattern of the number 40. Noah and his family took refuge in that ark as it rained for 40 days and 40 nights – the children of

Israel – after being enslaved by the Pharaohs of Egypt for 400 years are led to the Promised Land but are only allowed to enter after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Elijah goes on a fasting journey of 40 days to reach the Mountain of Horeb where he will encounter God in the terrible silence. All of these Old Testament stories involve some external journey but also, and more importantly, an internal journey. A journey as those involved are transformed by their experience. An internal transformation that is with challenges – like a crucible – the hottest furnace where metal is refined – where the impurities are burnt away – and the metal emerges as something purer and stronger. It is a testing ground – these 40 days – or 40-year wilderness wanderings – a testing ground where flawed individuals emerge faithful and righteous.

But why was this necessary? What was the purpose of this test for Jesus? Well to correct a failed test – a test failed at the beginning of time by our parents – Adam and Eve. We know that story well enough. Humanity – in Hebrew both Adam and Eve our collective terms for humanity – humanity is faced with temptation and fails miserably. But it is quite simple to merely saying of the temptation of adamant even as being something about an Apple. But of course there is more to that story ... more than just a bite

from the wrong apple. Let us look again briefly at that momentous event. God had placed humanity in a wonderful idyllic Garden, with only one limitation --- to not eat from one tree that is in the middle of the garden for as God warns them ... “if you eat from that you shall die.”

Then of course the serpent appears on the scene – the craftiest of all the wild animals – and this crafty serpent said “ if you eat you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” That was the sin of Adam and Eve – not just disobedience, but disobedience born from pride. Disobedience borne from doubt. It was not that the sly serpent said the Apple would be tasty or delicious or some such thing ... no it was because he said that God had lied to them and that the Apple would make them like God.

That was the sin that needed to be corrected before humanity could be in right relationship again with God – before we all could be faithful and righteous. It was the sin of pride – the sin of trying to be ... aspiring to be God – which was our downfall. And ironically, it was the man who was God who was called upon to make this correction.

Now on the basis of Mark's Gospel alone this interpretation may seem a little far-fetched – but as I say Luke and Matthew give us much more detailed accounts... accounts which include dialogue... accounts which give three specific temptations, all of which are temptations for Christ to act as God. And each time, Jesus humbly responds to these temptations with passages from Deuteronomy – that great book of the law. So to each and every temptation that Satan throws at Jesus hoping to get him to show his power – reveal his authority as the Son of God – Jesus responds by quoting the laws that govern humanity. Despite the fact that he could, indeed, have responded to any of the challenges Satan threw down – instead he humbly said – “I will walk this earth as a human in obedience to God's purpose in God's will.”

For it was God's will, not only that he be tempted at this point early in his career – but that there would be an even greater temptation to come – as he prayed in a garden – not the Garden of Eden but the Garden of Gethsemane – when those painful words fell from his lips “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want”. The ultimate affirmation of his obedience – before the ultimate affirmation of his

love as he fulfills his destiny and offers his life as salvation for all of the prodigal children of Adam and Eve.

So it is indeed fitting that we read the temptation story on this first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a 40 days of preparation – preparation for the great Easter event. It is a time when, like Noah, Moses and Elijah, we are invited to cleanse ourselves. Some may give up bad habits at this time, some may give up indulgences or luxuries. Whatever the discipline you choose to exercise, include in its regular contemplation and prayer. For it is not our bodies alone that need to be cleansed. But also our minds and hearts.

Over these next 40 days, what are the temptations that you will face? Is it merely indulging in some sweet or falling back into an old unhealthy habit. Or is there something more basic than I. It was not the bite of the Apple that was so damning. But the pride and the disobedience that stood behind it.

In this Lenten season, we ought to examine carefully – our pride and our disobedience. Pride is a slippery slope – like a serpent. It is hard to see and harder still to get hold of to root out. It lurks in the comfortable illusion that we are in control of our lives. It wraps itself around our belief that we are in

a position to judge the worthiness of others. It lies in wait, ready to strike, in our impatience, our irritability and our insensitivity to others.

And our disobedience. Our disobedience is a little easier to see – but no less a challenge to root out. It is in our being selective about, or ignoring, or our out and out breaking of those two great commandments – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul with all your mind this is the greatest and first commandment and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

So, in this Lenten season – let us prepare ourselves. Let us cleanse our bodies in our minds and our hearts – let us fight temptation and turn our backs on disobedience and pride. And let us prepare to be worthy inheritors of Easter miracle.