

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Mark 1:9-15

In the church three year cycle of readings, we are in Year B, which focuses on the Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four gospels. Mark tends to tell his stories with less detail than the other three. Mark says what he needs to say about events and moves on.

The result is seen clearly in today's reading. Every Lenten Season, the first Sunday in Lent leads us through Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness by Satan. You may recall that Jesus has been fasting and Satan urges Him to turn rocks into bread to eat. But Jesus responds that he relies not on bread, but on God, not on material things, but on God His creator. Then Satan urges Jesus to worship him, in exchange for glory on earth, but Jesus responds that God alone is to be worshiped.

And finally, Satan advises Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, to test God's care for him, but Jesus refuses to test God in this way. Only after these 'temptations' does Satan leave Jesus, and Jesus returns from his forty days time in the wilderness.

What takes half a page to describe in Matthew and Luke takes two sentences in Mark: "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus 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." That's it. That is the total story Mark has to tell. The passage is so short that the lectionary includes both the two brief verses that describe Jesus' baptism before his wilderness time, and the two verses that describe the beginning

of Jesus' ministry after his wilderness time, seemingly just to make the text for today long enough to bother with.

Why does Mark shortchange us on details? Doesn't Mark think the details are important? After all, can't we learn from hearing the specifics of Jesus' struggle and his ability to overcome his struggle?

Jesus' time in the wilderness for forty days is, in fact, our model for Lent. Like Jesus, we seek to spend a special time, a span of forty days, preparing, reflecting, praying, readying ourselves, knowing the hard path that comes and anticipating the joyous Easter celebration that follows. In our hurried world, we don't want to rush through these forty days. We are always rushing through things as it is, we're already always counting down to something else, counting the days until birthdays, or until Christmas, or until payday or until school is out, or until vacation, we're always biding our time until something else happens. We should not do that with Lent too, just count down until Easter, and waste the time we have, miss the opportunity for digging deeper spiritually, skipping over the process of looking inside of ourselves, letting ourselves be remade by God. We should not want our Lent experience to be worth only two sentences, we should not want everything we experience in the next several weeks to impact us only enough to be worth a passing comment. We should want more from Lent, for all of us, and we would like to have more from Mark on this time in Jesus' life, this time where we can see the human Jesus, struggling to make right choices, just like we do.

But, we must work with our two sentences. That's all that Mark gives us. What is Mark telling us? What does it mean? What does Mark want us to hear in *his* account of the temptation?

Does he want us to believe that this wilderness time was no big

deal to Jesus, that He didn't 'get anything' important out of his forty days and that it is not important for us?

But what if Mark is actually saying exactly the opposite? For Mark, what happens in the wilderness with Jesus and Satan is important because of what happens *after* Jesus is in the wilderness. For Mark, after his forty days away, Jesus immediately gets to work, beginning to preach and proclaim the good news about the kingdom of God coming near. We don't need the details because we know the conclusion, Jesus' time in the wilderness sets the tone for his ministry that moves non-stop once it begins, as Jesus interacts, according to Mark, constantly with people, healing, teaching, loving.

None of us would probably want to list every experience we've had, every sin we've committed, every mistake we've made to the rest of the congregation. No doubt we've all experienced temptation, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing to overcome impulses that lead us away from God. Undoubtedly we've all had dry times in our lives, empty times, rock-bottom times where we've done some serious soul-searching, where we've really had to decide whether or not we could pull ourselves together, whether or not we were going to walk a path with God or not. These times, difficult and painful, are also valuable; they shape us, make us who we are. They have their place in our life stories that would probably take more than two verses to tell.

But our stories don't stop there, our stories aren't middle chapters, our life purpose isn't bogged down in our darkest days.

Instead, what we experience in the wilderness sets the tone for the rest of our lives. It is what is written in the rest of the chapters of our lives that will tell others what we learned and experienced in the desert times. And so it is *tempting*, on the

one hand, to stall in the dry seasons of our lives, to get overwhelmed by temptations that seem to keep us from moving forward. Perhaps we have mistakes and faults and shortcomings that are keeping us from moving forward. But Mark reminds us to just get on with it already, to live, to learn, to repent, to be forgiven, and to share the good news that we've found in Jesus Christ.

In this season of Lent, may we find that our experiences bring us more to think about and talk about than two sentences. May we not let ourselves get caught up in only our failings and inadequacies in this season of self-reflection. Our discipleship is shaped by where we've been, where we want to go, and who we are following to get there. So let's get on with proclaiming the message of love and grace, the story that's worth all the pages we have left to write in our story.

AMEN.