

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased." <sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. <sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the gospel."

Mark 1:9-15

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"Jesus' Temptation"

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A kindergarten teacher was suddenly taken ill and a replacement was hastily found. The substitute teacher was used to older children, and was at a loss as to what to do with such little ones. So she decided to tell them stories. And at the end of each story, she would say, "And the moral of that story is..."

After dozens of stories, the children had sat through dozens of morals. The regular teacher recovered from her illness and returned to her class. One of her students—little Johnny—was particularly happy to see her. He greeted her with a smile and said, "Teacher, I sure am glad you're back. I like you way better than that other teacher."

His teacher was flattered, but curious. "Why do you like me better than the other teacher?"

Little Johnny looked into the teacher's eyes and said, "Because you don't have any morals." [from The Pastor's Story File (Saratoga Press, P.O. Box 8, Platteville, CO, 80651; 970-785-2990), August 1993; as used in "WWF: Smack Down In The Wilderness" by Billy D. Strayhorn, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I wonder how his teacher took that. We'll never know, I guess. Thankfully, most of us have morals. Chances are, we wouldn't be gathered here this morning if we didn't. Not that the church exists merely to teach the morals, but we do have a role to play in discipling one another to grow in the needed moral fiber for navigating choices and behavior in today's world. And for many of us here today, those morals are grounded, shaped, and lived out by the faith we profess in Christ.

But it isn't always easy. I don't have to tell you that. Every last one of us has, at some point, felt our morals being tested. Sometimes, we're not sure what the most moral choice is—the most Christ-like. And sometimes, we go against our own morals. We sin. We hurt ourselves or others. We do wrong. We betray our own convictions. That's part of the reason we come together, week after week—to hold our moral underpinnings up to the light of Christ, lest they become weak. We come in search of guidance, help, strength. And we come in search of repentance, absolution, grace.

But most of us come Sunday after Sunday because we have some awareness that there's more to the fullness of life than merely being moral. I am a spiritual being, with a deep inward hunger to connect with a life-force bigger than myself. I need God. I need relationship. I need companionship, especially when facing the trying moral questions of my existence. And mind you, when I speak of the trying moral questions of my existence, I'm not talking about abortion, homosexuality, immigration, or health care—although all those political issues are moral questions of serious import. No, I'm talking about the moral questions that confront me every time I open my wallet...or my mouth...or a book. I'm talking about the moral questions that confront me every time I turn on my computer...or my TV...or my imagination.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. It is traditionally the Sunday we associate with the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. As we begin this time of discipline and inner discernment, temptation seems like a wise place to start. Temptation is often understood as a pull to do something we shouldn't, as in, we're tempted to cheat on our diet...or our taxes...or our spouse. In other words, temptation is the pull to compromise our morals. But I consider the pull to compromise morals as symptomatic of something deeper. Theologically speaking, temptation has more to do with the pull to be someone other than who God calls us to be. Lent is about looking honestly at ourselves. It's about exposing the dark, dingy corners of our souls to the light of Christ in order that we may become more like Christ. It's about confronting those aspects of our lives that hinder us from living into our identity as God's children.

"Dr. Hendrik Kramer was a missionary in Indonesia for over twenty years in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Dr. Kramer returned home to his native Holland, the Nazis were over-running his country and arresting Jews who lived there. It was a very difficult time for him to come home. Even Christians who resisted Hitler were being arrested and sent to labor camps. The remaining Christians were drawn to Dr. Kramer for strength and inspiration. Late one night in the cover of darkness some of them slipped into his house. "Tell us what to do," they pleaded, "our Jewish neighbors are being dragged out of their homes and off to the gas chambers. And many of our own are hearing the knock of the Gestapo on the door at night. Tell us, Herr Doctor, tell us what to do."

"Kramer was silent for a time as he bowed his head in prayer. Then he spoke with the conviction that characterized his life. "I cannot tell you what to do," he said, "but I can tell you who you are!" And with that he opened his Bible and began to read. [2 ¶s adapted from Maxie Dunnam, *Pack Up Your Troubles*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 19-20.; as used in "Afraid Of The Water" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Our scripture lesson begins this morning with Jesus hearing about who he is. "You are my Beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased." And that...that is when the temptations come. Jesus has to wrestle with what it means to be God's beloved son.

It's worth noting that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make a point of telling us that Jesus was tempted. Matthew and Luke provide a very detailed blow-by-blow account of the temptations Jesus faces and the conversation he has with Satan. But not Mark. Mark is succinct. To the point. Blunt, even. Mark tells us in 15 short verses what it takes Matthew and Luke four whole chapters to tell.

In today's lesson, the temptation of Jesus gets a measly 2 verses. "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, where he remained for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

That's it. That's all we get. We have no idea what the specific nature of Jesus' temptations were here – only that he's tempted. But we dare not assume that because we don't have a detailed record of Christ's encounter with evil, there is nothing worth pondering here. On the contrary, we don't get details from Mark unless they matter, unless they're crucial to the point Mark is trying to make. And occasionally, Mark includes some pretty strange details—things that make me wonder: why on earth does he tell us that? Listen again to those two verses: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, where he remained for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." In those two pithy little verses, Mark tells us some things that no other gospel writer tells us.

For one thing, notice the somewhat...well...violent language. As Jesus emerges from the baptismal waters of the Jordan, the heavens are torn apart. Do you know when else the heavens are torn apart? During the crucifixion. And then, after receiving this heavenly blessing from God—you are my beloved son—he is driven out into the wilderness. Driven. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus is 'led' by the Spirit into the wilderness, which seems to imply that he chooses to follow. But in Mark, he's driven, compelled, forced, shoved out there. There's a violence to it – he's not given choices or options. And since Mark doesn't choose words randomly, note that the word 'driven' is lifted right out of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden after they sin—same word. The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

But let me push that a little further. Unlike Matthew and Luke, who both get caught up in this worrisome frenzy of how to explain why one who doesn't sin needs a baptism of repentance, Mark has no issue with that. We need a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And if we need it, Jesus is going to lead the way into it. Jesus will not ask us to go where he hasn't gone. The same holds true for temptation in the wilderness. The wilderness is where things are confusing, and dangerous, and hard, and scary—it's where we feel cut off from God, from one another, from life, from hope. It's where Adam and Eve were sent to toil and suffer and work. But it's symbolic—it's symbolic of the human experience. It's another way of saying, "hey, it's a jungle out there!" It means life is messy. It doesn't fit in neat boxes that can be categorized in simple terms. Life is contradictions, and yes, it's confusing, dangerous, hard, and scary. And Jesus is driven out there—out among the rest of us. Out where the people are—the people he came to save. And he faces the same temptations we do. But he overcomes temptation. He demonstrates a powerful truth that there is no where we can go that God cannot connect with us. We're never alone. And hope is never absent altogether.

Taken symbolically, the spirit of God drives Jesus, compels him, pushes him out onto a spiritual landscape where the lost and the wandering are; where the suffering and the hurt struggle; where the disheartened and disconnected languish. That kind of action has another name. It's called love. Jesus represents a reversal, a healing of the sin that mars us. Adam and Eve were driven out by sin, but Jesus is driven out by love. Jesus knows all about the wildernesses of this world. He's driven into them. But he never gives into a temptation to draw into himself, to prioritize himself, to draw attention to himself or to compromise himself. He remains open to the Spirit and connected to the energy of God's love.

Another fascinating little detail Mark tells us is that he's out there in the wilderness with the wild beasts. I believe Mark tells us that for two reasons, which are not mutually exclusive. One reason is that Jesus' ability to live with the wild beasts is a fulfillment of the Peaceable Kingdom described in Isaiah 11:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them...  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

Unlike Matthew and Luke's accounts, which emphasize the conflict between Jesus and Satan, Mark highlights features of the Kingdom of God made possible through Christ when temptation and disconnectedness is defeated. It represents a kind of reversal whereby Jesus heals what once was broken and ruptured—in this case, the relationship between humanity and creation. The temptation to forget who and whose we are, to fall prey to the illusion that we're alone, that nothing gets better, that God can't reach us out here in the wilderness is overcome by a realization that we are connected to every living thing through the Spirit of God—that peace is possible, even in the barrenness of the wilderness.

Another theory suggests that wild beasts represent the evil that lives in all of us. Again, these theories aren't mutually exclusive. Jesus faced his share of wild beasts. I don't know what kind of doubts or fears might have kept him up at night, but I know he went to God in prayer when the beasts within got hungry. I know he knew what wilderness was, even right smack in the middle of Jerusalem. Which is how I know he is with me when the wild beasts come stir up my wilderness. I know he can deal with the beasts I can't—beasts of illness, or anger, or fear, or temptation. And if temptation, at its root, is really the pull to be someone other than who God calls me to be, then I know Jesus has something to say about who I am called to be in the world.

The final detail Mark gives us about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is that in addition to the drive and the beasts and the fact that he's tempted, Jesus finds himself in the company of ministering

angels. I don't know what Marks means when he says angels waited on Jesus. He doesn't describe them. And yet, I know I've met them. You have too. The ministering angel I remember most is a stranger I met on the bus in Boston. It had been a bad day. I read the wrong stuff for class that morning, and was totally out of the loop in the lecture. When I went into work that afternoon, I was sent to another store owned by the same people where I didn't know anybody, or where things were, or how the routine went, so I was out of my element. That evening, I needed to be at a meeting St John's UMC in Watertown, where I was interning, but I was catching the bus at a strange stop because I'd been working at a different store. By the time I figured out that I was waiting at the wrong place for my bus, the meeting was starting and I was still 40 minutes away from Watertown. As we often do when having a rough day, I starting rehearsing everything that had gone wrong – all this mistakes, all I still had to do – and I before I knew it, I'm standing on a packed Boston bus crying. That's when a woman looked over at me, and rather than looking away in discomfort, she offered me a knowing smile and said, "Bad day, huh?" Actually, she used a different word than 'bad', which I won't say from the pulpit, but it made me laugh because I didn't expect it. "Yeah," I said. "Bad day." And she nodded and said, "I've cried on this bus on the way home." It wasn't profound. It wasn't advice. It was just empathy, but it brought me back from the edge of the wilderness. She gave me perspective. She gave me connection. She extended compassion. A ministering angel. The truth is, most of the times we fill that role, we may not even know we're doing so. She probably has no idea that I remember her more than 25 years later. It comes back to who we're called to be in the world. We're sinners. We're all broken somehow. We wander in and out of the wilderness. But we don't go alone. Jesus walks alongside us. He tames our beasts. He breathes his peace. He ignites our hope. He drives our love. And even in the wilderness, he shapes us to be ministering angels with him in a thousand ways. This Lent, don't just give up stuff. Give yourself. Let Jesus tell you who you are – a beloved child, a treasured servant, a force for good, an imperfect vessel to hold God's perfect love. Thanks be to God. Amen.