

**ST. JOHN’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

February 21, 2021 – LENT I (YR. B)

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Sermon: “*Wilderness as Divine Empowerment*”

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| Genesis 9:8-17 | (God establishes a covenant with humanity) |
| Psalms 25:1-9 | (The Lord forgives sin and guides the humble) |
| 1 Peter 3:18-22 | (Christ died for our sins, and is now risen) |
| St. Mark 1:9-13 | (Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness) |

Our Lenten journey always begins with the testing of Jesus in the wilderness, following His baptism. The same Holy Spirit who came upon Our Lord at His baptism drives Jesus out into the desert—the word translated as “drove out” is also the term used later in Mark, when Jesus “casts out” demons. It conveys a sense of urgency and compulsion. This was not a gentle leading. Jesus had to comply.¹

In contrast to Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels, this version is stark. In the story as St. Mark tells it, there is no dialogue between Jesus and the devil. The only details given are that “he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (1:13). The phrase “wait on” is used elsewhere in Mark to indicate serving or ministering to. So Jesus was not alone in the wilderness. There were wild beasts, angels—and Satan. In the Old Testament tradition, Satan was an adversary who tested the faithfulness of those chosen by God, such as we read about in Job (1:6-12) and Zechariah (3:1).²

And so, Jesus is being tested by Satan in preparation for His ministry to come, a ministry that would include going to the Cross. Empowered by the Holy Spirit at His baptism, that empowerment brought responsibility, and with that responsibility, temptations concerning how Christ would exercise His vocation. Should the emphasis be on *compassion*, on caring for the needy and feeding the hungry? Should it be focused on unprecedented communication, demonstrating *authority* with which no one could argue? Should it be about obtaining *power*, the ability to compel obedience?³

Matthew and Luke describe these issues in terms of specific temptations. But for Mark, it is sufficient that Jesus *was* tempted. This evangelist prefers to emphasize the fact that Satan failed to win that round. Satan would have no victories until God permitted evil to prevail for a brief time, in order that Jesus might be crucified for us.⁴

So, if even Our Lord experienced temptation, how could we expect to be exempt? God does not promise us an absence of trials or suffering. However, He gives us the same means of overcoming these that Jesus had: The presence of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of His angels to care for us.

But how does temptation come about? In Matthew and Luke, we are told that Jesus was alone, hungry, and weakened. The forms of temptation are many, but we are more likely to experience them when we are isolated, craving something emotionally or physically, and our defenses are down. Bible commentator Donald Armentrout writes: “Temptation may seem like the vast emptiness of the desert or a tight vessel with no hatch for escape ...[but] the trial ends when the isolation ends.”⁵ We need to be aware that we are not as isolated as we think. With God on our side, we too can win our confrontations with evil—whether that darkness arises from within us, or assaults us from without.

First John 4:4 (NASB) reminds us that we can be overcomers, “because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” When temptation comes our way, we are not alone. God is with us. And each time “wilderness days” of testing come our way, we become more experienced at dealing with them and are better able to make it through. Likewise, the Holy Spirit works with us through the overcoming of trials and temptations so that we are then able to help others with the same help which we have received.⁶

Jesus' sojourn in the desert for 40 days recalls the fast of Moses on Mt. Sinai in preparation for receiving the Ten Commandments from God (Deut. 9:18); Elijah's time on Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 19:8) before he went on to do powerful things for God; and the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert, prior to their entry into the Promised Land. Thus, in the Bible's view, the wilderness is a place of Divine testing and revelation, in preparation for God's saving work in the world—and in us.

Mark's short account of Christ's temptation is filled with images from the Old Testament. When he speaks of Jesus being in the wasteland for 40 days, one of the many events evoked for his readers' memory is the "undoing" of Creation at the time of the flood that destroyed the world.

Noah and his family also spent 40 days in the company of beasts, in what must surely have been a time of trial, cooped up in the ark. Mark suggests to his readers that with Jesus' forty-day stay in the desert, another significant "undoing" is about to take place. Although he doesn't say it explicitly, Mark leads his readers to recognize this through another allusion. He says that Jesus "was among wild beasts," painting an image of peaceful coexistence that reminds us of the harmonious relationship between man and beasts in Creation before the Fall (Gen. 1:28; 2:19-20).⁷

Thus, Mark leads us to identify Jesus with the second Adam—a comparison St. Paul also makes in 1 Corinthians 15. Christ's coming marks the dawn of a new creation. Like Adam, Jesus is also tempted. But unlike Adam, He does not succumb to the devil. Through His obedience to God, Christ undoes the disobedience of Adam, reversing the consequences of sin, and returning us to God—which is precisely the meaning of repentance. The Hebrew term for "repent!" literally means to "go back," or "turn around" and get on the right path, to "return" to God.⁸

So, immediately after leaving the wilderness, Jesus begins preaching "repent and believe the Gospel"—or "Good News" (1:15). For St. Mark, this means believing in Jesus, Himself.

St. Mark's gospel opens with the words, "The beginning of the good news, which is Jesus Christ, Son of God" (1:1). When rendered this way, the term "good news" is understood not only as "concerning" Jesus, but rather, as "Jesus Christ Himself is the good news".⁹

I think that's why Mark doesn't bother with the details of Satan's temptation. That's not what matters most. Mark wants to point us toward Jesus, who will bring about the salvation of the world. Jesus, who will establish with humankind God's new covenant.

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis is paired with Mark's gospel because it recalls for us the covenant relationship established between God and His people in the time of Noah. This first covenant will have its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus' death for our salvation, the new covenant in Christ's blood. God's deliverance of Noah out of the flood is symbolic of salvation, just as the waters of baptism will symbolize for Jesus' followers deliverance from sin and death.¹⁰

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, we know from putting together all the gospel accounts that He defended himself with Scripture, and was cared for by angels. The question for us on this first Sunday in Lent is: How will we, individually and corporately, journey through these 40 days that God has given us, as an opportunity for Divine testing, revelation, and ultimately, victory. Will we, by examining Jesus' journey, dare to explore the spiritual desert, where we are called to face down and overcome the "wild beasts" of our own sinfulness, self-centeredness, and self-deception? Are we willing to endure a certain amount of trial, in order to develop the quality of ministry into which God is leading us?¹¹

Jesus wasn't alone in the desert, and neither are we. It is only in a committed fellowship, a true apostolic community of faith, that we are able to successfully practice this kind of self-examination, and to identify our own paths to proclaiming, and living out, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Fortunately, we have before us some very practical tools for our Lenten journey: Daily Bible reading—either with the Good News Daily insert in your Sunday bulletin, or the Forward Day by Day or Our Daily Bread devotional booklets in the literature rack. Stations of the Cross on Fridays provide us a time of prayer, and because we cannot share a fellowship meal afterward at this time, this deprivation also gives us a bit of “fasting.” The fact that, instead, we are asking those who attend to bring canned goods and unperishable foods for the Octorara Area Food Cupboard, affords us an opportunity to give sacrificially and charitably to those in need.

In the end, our Lenten journey will not be defined so much by what we “give up,” but by who we will *become*. Jesus used His 40 days to be strengthened by God for ministry.

May He give us grace to do the same. Amen.

¹ Adapt. “Empowered for Ministry,” *Synthesis – Year B* (26 February 2012), p. 1

² *Ibid.*

³ Adapt. H. King Oehmig, “The Two Roads,” *Synthesis – Year B* (26 February 2012), p. 4

⁴ Adapt. C. Robert Allred, bobs-sermons.com, qtd. in “Tradition,” *Synthesis – Year B* (26 February 2012), p. 2

⁵ Adapt. Donald S. Armentrout, “Tradition,” *Synthesis – Year B* (26 February 2012), p. 2

⁶ Adapt. Allred, *op. cit.*

⁷ Adapt. Oehmig, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Adapt. “Empowered for Ministry,” *Synthesis – Year B* (26 February 2012), p. 1

¹¹ Adapt. Oehmig, *op. cit.*