

Title: Retreat into Lent

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, give us the will and discernment to spend time in this season of Lent in holy contemplation, emulating your son who spent time in the wilderness, preparing for his own ministry, and through whom we pray. Amen.

The local sheriff was looking for a deputy, and one of the applicants - who was not known to be the brightest academically, was called in for an interview. "Okay," began the sheriff, "What is 1 and 1?" "Eleven," came the reply. The sheriff thought to himself, "That's not what I meant, but he's right."

Then the sheriff asked, "What two days of the week start with the letter 'T'?" "Today & tomorrow," replied the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised over the answer, one that he had never thought of himself.

"Now, listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?" asked the sheriff. The job seeker seemed a little surprised, then thought really hard for a minute and finally admitted, "I don't know." The sheriff replied, "Well, why don't you go home and work on that one for a while?" The applicant left and wandered over to his pals who were waiting to hear the results of the interview. He greeted them with a cheery smile, "The job is mine! The interview went great! First day on the job and I'm already working on a murder case!"

The Holy Spirit also told Jesus to go and spend some time to work on what his baptism meant. And you know what? After his time in the wilderness, Jesus got the job!

Verse nine of Mark's gospel is typically translated as, "in those days." This is a literary device that Mark uses to mark a transition. This particular transition is a shift from talking about John the Baptist's ministry to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism.

We observed Jesus' baptism last month. But because Mark's gospel is so terse, we hear it again today to help fill in the temptation scene. Even though

the lectionary authors made this choice, we are left with a profound theological statement: Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism.

Just as Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism, our ministries also begin with our baptism. After Jesus was baptized, he received the Holy Spirit. It is our theology, as expressed in the *Book of Common Prayer*, that we, too, receive the Holy Spirit at our baptisms. (Though I do believe that people receive the Holy Spirit and respond by seeking baptism.)

But it is this empowering of the Holy Spirit that gives us gifts and pushes us to do the ministry that God calls us and made us to do. By "made," I am not saying God compels us to minister, but this is probably true, I mean that God created us to do a particular ministry or ministries.

We are heirs with Christ. St. Paul uses that language to describe our relationship to God and to God's kingdom, but we are also heirs with Christ in Jesus' ministry. What Jesus did in three years could only be done by the Son of God. As heirs with Christ, it takes all of us, all Christians, to continue Jesus' work in the world. Granted that we are sinful, flawed beings, but we are still empowered by the Holy Spirit to do Jesus' work.

But no individual can do what Jesus did. That is why it takes the huge collective of Christians to continue Jesus' work. Jesus' ministry was confined to a small area of the Middle East. It was brief. Jesus depends on every Christian since then to continue his work.

It is through our baptisms that we are commissioned for Jesus' ministry. Since no one of us can do what Jesus did, we are each given one, two, or at most three gifts for the work of Christ. That is another reason why it takes all of us. All of us, together, have all of Jesus' gifts. We need to work together to accomplish the task that Jesus gave us to do. And that task is to bring about God's kingdom here on earth.

And that brings us to this particular Sunday and what Jesus did immediately after his baptism. Mark tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus did not necessarily go willingly (though a long theological discussion could result from that proposition).

On this first Sunday of Lent, we always hear of Jesus' trip to the wilderness. Mark does not give us a lot of detail. Jesus is there a long time. Again, the euphemism, 40 days, means a long time in the Bible. Jesus is tempted by Satan. Jesus is with wild beasts and apparently is not eaten by them. And angels waited on him.

This story is picked for the first Sunday of Lent to remind us of what we may do in this holy season. Jesus needed time alone to contemplate what he would do next and to form in his mind how his ministry would play out. It was a personal retreat. Satan nagged him and angels took care of him, the kinds of things that should happen during a retreat.

We hear this story to remind us that this is a good time for our own personal or group retreats. This is a time to review our baptisms and discern again how we will use our gifts for the greater glory of God. If we are not baptized, it is a time to contemplate what we have to bring to the church and how we will follow Christ.

Jesus was tempted by Satan. Often we read this and assume that Satan is still around to drive us nuts. But this is not what Mark writes about. Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Mark does not elaborate like Matthew and Luke do. Mark portrays Jesus as the one who confronts evil and prevails. That is why we read about so many exorcisms in Mark. In the end, Jesus triumphs and vanquishes Satan on the cross. Jesus defeats Satan so that we need no longer be bedeviled by Satan. Too often, some people blame the devil for their own lack of personal responsibility.

Jesus was with wild beasts. Not all beasts look at a human being and think that God has provided the animal's next meal. Some beasts eat plants. But in both cases, Jesus survives their company. I can't help but believe that this is a reference to Eden. In Eden, all animals, including humans are vegetarians. I think Mark is saying that Jesus' presence in the wilderness gave him a glimpse of Eden. In spite of Satan and wild beasts, Jesus gives the wilderness peace and harmony – the kind of peace and harmony that were at Eden. This is what Jesus is talking about when he talks about the kingdom of God.

The angels waited on him. This is the strangest part of the story. An angel is literally a messenger. That is what the word means. Angels deliver God's

messages to people. That's their job. Here, angels are acting like deacons – ones who wait on others. Since angels waited on him, Jesus would have no need. A place where there is peace and no need is Eden or the kingdom of God.

Jesus' retreat in the wilderness tells him what the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus could have told people what happened during his retreat, but they would not be able grasp it, because they weren't there. Instead, Jesus tells parables. Jesus uses every day examples that give people hints at what the kingdom of God looks like. And it all started in the wilderness after Jesus' baptism.

Seemingly, just as soon as Jesus' retreat is over, John the Baptist is arrested. Jesus goes to the Galilee region and begins preaching the same message that John the Baptist did, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Jesus brings the aura of Eden, of the kingdom of God, in his person from the wilderness to the Galilee. And as we have seen, people who see Jesus, see something new and wonderful.

This Lent, I commend you to spend time in self-examination. The Rev. Craig Gates of Jackson, Mississippi has a great list of suggestions. He says we should:

GIVE UP grumbling! Instead, "In everything give thanks." Constructive criticism is OK, but "moaning, groaning, and complaining" are not Christian disciplines.

GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed! Instead, use that time in prayer, Bible study and personal devotion. A few minutes in prayer *will* keep you focused.

GIVE UP looking at other people's worst attributes. Instead concentrate on their best points. We all have faults. It is a lot easier to have people overlook our shortcomings when we overlook theirs first.

GIVE UP speaking unkindly. Instead, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting or to offer a smile. Why not check that sharp tongue at the door?

GIVE UP your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, learn the discipline of love. “Love covers a multitude of sins.”

GIVE UP your worries and anxieties! They’re too heavy for you to carry anyway. Instead, trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about: like tomorrow! Live today and let God’s grace be sufficient.

GIVE UP TV one evening a week! Instead, visit someone who’s lonely or sick. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Why isolate yourself in front of the “tube?” Give someone a precious gift: your time!

GIVE UP buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on the luxuries could help someone meet basic needs. We’re called to be stewards of God’s riches, not consumers.

GIVE UP judging others by appearances and by the standard of the world! Instead, learn to give up yourself to God. There is only one who has the right to judge, Christ Jesus.

Text: **Mark 1:9–15** (NRSV)

<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 on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>h</sup> with you 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, tempted 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<sup>i</sup> of God,<sup>j</sup> <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;<sup>k</sup> repent, and believe in the good news.”<sup>l</sup>

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<sup>h</sup> Or *my beloved Son*

<sup>i</sup> Or *gospel*

<sup>j</sup> Other ancient authorities read *of the kingdom*

<sup>k</sup> Or *is at hand*

<sup>l</sup> Or *gospel*

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:9–15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.