

## ***Turn To The Lord***

Mark 1:9-15  
March 1, 2009

### **I.**

Our Gospel from Mark today identifies three sermon topics. One is the Baptism of Jesus and God's voice of approval from heaven. Another is Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God is near. We have heard about both of these recently, and so that leaves the third, which is the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert. That's what we will consider this morning.

And Mark's Gospel on this subject was very short. He did not include any of the dialogue between Jesus and Satan that we find in the versions of the same story in Matthew and Luke. There's nothing about turning bread into stones, or ruling the earth, or jumping off the temple. Mark just said that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days with the wild beasts; that he was tempted by Satan; and that angels cared for him. That's it.

But sometimes that's more than enough. A lot of preachers can talk about sin and temptation without any apparent prompting. In other churches, however, sin and temptation is not a fashionable topic. The reason for these different approaches is, to some extent, that people only look at one side of a two-sided subject.

They either concern themselves with sin and obedience, and ignore God's grace, love, and forgiveness. Or else they are so convinced that God's love will save them that they don't worry about accountability, judgment, and consequences. Both cases are examples of spiritual blinders. Both cases are examples of treating God in a black and white way when he actually wants us to see him in technicolor.

And so today I want to talk about sin and temptation, and at the end I hope that you do not feel guilty about your life but rather feel secure in your faith. My purpose is not to deliver a fire and brimstone sermon about what happens when we forget about God, but rather to offer a hopeful and promising perspective on what happens when we remember God.

### **II.**

But first, we should consider a basic question about the story of Jesus' temptation by Satan. Many people say that Jesus is a model for us. He resisted temptation, and therefore we should do the same. Very simple. End of story. Right?

Well, there's a little more to it. Let's begin by asking if there was anything unique about this confrontation in the wilderness between Jesus and Satan. Was there something about the circumstances of this story that distinguishes it from our own lives?

One difference is obvious. We are not sons of God or daughters of God in the way Jesus was the Son of God. We were not blessed at our baptisms with a booming voice from heaven that was well pleased with us. We do not have supernatural powers and cannot perform miracles.

Does that mean that Jesus was walking around in the wilderness with an ace in his back pocket? Was the fix already in? Had God and Jesus stacked the odds against the devil? And if so, how can Jesus' rejection of temptation be any kind of a standard for us?

Here is my understanding of what went down in the wilderness, and an important part of it is Jesus' nature. He was both fully human and fully divine. Both natures existed simultaneously within him. While it's a mystery as to how it worked, his human nature came into being on earth through the Virgin Mary, and his divine nature was imparted from heaven through the Holy Spirit.

And perhaps, because of his human nature, Jesus could have succumbed to Satan's temptations. His human aspect had free will just as we have free will. But Jesus' humanity did not exist apart from his divinity. As a result, even though Jesus, in his humanity, might have yielded to Satan's evil schemes, he also, in his divinity, simply was not capable of giving in.

But even so, Jesus knows what temptation is like. He felt it as we feel it. The Book of Hebrews tells us that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are" (4:15). Jesus knows how Satan tries to separate us from God because he experienced it in the wilderness. And he knows how clever and diabolical Satan can be in placing these temptations before us.

### **III.**

Volumes have been written about sin and temptation. Friday afternoon I googled the word "sin" on the internet and came up with over one billion hits. "Temptation" had over seven million. And there also are old traditional images that come to mind.

I always have been a fan of newspaper comics, and still am today. One of my favorites is a syndicated strip called "Snuffy Smith," a story set somewhere in Appalachia or the Ozarks that features a fellow who lives in a shack, makes moonshine, is in constant trouble with the sheriff, and is known for stealing chickens.

The main character, Snuffy, sometimes is portrayed in a dilemma with a miniature Snuffy dressed as an angel hovering above one shoulder, and a miniature Snuffy dressed as a devil above the other. And both would be whispering in his ears, one urging him to do good, and the other suggesting mischief. We all probably have seen that humorous image in other settings as well.

How often do we find ourselves in that kind of situation? And how do we respond? Do we listen to the little angel whispering in our ear, or do we listen to the little devil, or do we as good Episcopalians sometimes look for a middle ground?

That last possibility reminds me of the story of a fellow who decided to give up donuts for Lent, and thereafter arrived at the office with a big box of Krispy Kremes, one of them partially eaten.

His co-workers knew of his Lenten plans, and they asked why he stopped for donuts. He said, "I told God that if he wanted me have some donuts, there would be a parking place open right in front of the bakery. And sure enough, on the seventh time around the block, there it was!"

The message of this story illustrates temptation at work. It shows how we can rationalize doing things that are not evil in and of themselves, even though they are not what God wants for us.

### **IV.**

With that background let's consider how temptation and sin work in our lives. They typically appear in one of two ways. The process can start slowly and innocently and grow into something that eventually is wicked. Or it can be a small thing that remains small but still corrupts. I have used the frog as an example of the first, and the fly as an example of the second.

It supposedly is true that if you drop a frog into a pot of boiling water it immediately will jump out. But if you put the frog in a pot of cold water and slowly turn the heat up to boiling, the frog will remain in the pot and eventually die.

Gradual temptations operate in similar ways. Obviously, if Satan tried to trick you into something seriously bad right away you, like the frog, probably wouldn't sit still for it. But if it starts with just a little thing, followed by another thing, which gives rise to more disregard of God's will for us, then we can be like the slow-cooked frog. Before we realize it we are in really hot water.

Smaller transgressions are the same way. Pride and vanity are good examples. They are acts of disobedience just like bigger ones. They might not seem as serious, and perhaps they are not, but they corrupt nonetheless. And if they are not dealt with they accumulate and distort our relationship with God.

The fly is an example of these little things. Suppose a fly lands in your soup. That fly's body mass might only count for a hundred-thousandth of a percent of what is in the bowl. Practically negligible. And you might even flick the fly out and the soup would look exactly the same as it did before the fly appeared. But you would know that the fly had been there, and you would know that the fly had corrupted the entire bowl, just as God knows all we do.

We are urged to remember that Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things. Those temptations are wrapped in pretty packages with plausible explanations. They are directed to the things that matter most in our jobs, families, marriages, and our lives. They contain elements of truth wrapped in attractive lies, and are designed to separate us from God.

And we all are susceptible. Paul said in 1 Cor., "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (10:13). In Romans he said, "There is no one who [always] is righteous, not even one" (3:10-12). And in 1 John we are told, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

I think we all can acknowledge that in some way or another we all experience temptations that lead to transgressions for which we must repent and seek forgiveness if we are to live in God's will. That certainly applies to me, and in some ways even giving a sermon on sin can seem hypocritical because I also cannot always do what God wants me to do.

That's why we celebrate Eucharist every Sunday. We confess our sins and pray the Eucharistic prayer. This is not an empty ritual. I am not up here just reciting words. Things actually happen in our spiritual lives during this time even though they are not visible. We are forgiven.

And forgiveness is a large part of why we share the presence of Christ here at the communion rail, in addition to offering ourselves. We acknowledge we have not been obedient whether our sins are big or small. But whatever they are, through our Lord Jesus Christ we are forgiven over and over again, each Sunday we come here, because there is nothing we can do in our own strength to claim God's favor. Only through God's grace in Jesus Christ do we have hope.

## V.

This is how we deal with temptation and its effects. We know we cannot contend with Satan directly. And there is no need for us to confront him as Jesus did in the wilderness. Satan is too strong and we have other options. We simply must turn away from the devil and turn toward our Lord and Savior. He's been there. He's done that. He knows what we feel, and through the Spirit he can protect us and help us do what God calls us to do.

Two closing thoughts here. First, when we do yield to temptation of some kind or another, as will happen from time to time, whether it is something large or small, we again can turn to Jesus with true repentance and seek forgiveness, and he will restore us to a right relationship with God.

Second, however, that does not mean we can do whatever we want during the week just because we think we will be forgiven on Sunday. That would not produce true repentance, and therefore there would not be real forgiveness. But if we faithfully turn to our Lord and Savior in times of testing and temptation, whenever it happens, he will see us through. He knows what its like, and he will strengthen us to resist. *Amen.*