

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15

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I.

I remember the first sermon I wrote for the first preaching course I ever took. More exactly, I don't much remember the sermon, but I remember the response the sermon got. The assignment was to preach a sermon for the first Sunday in Lent, and I chose to preach on the temptation narrative from Matthew's Gospel.

I was still no doubt much influenced by my college reading of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In that novel one of the protagonists, Ivan, has a vision. In that vision Jesus Christ has been imprisoned by the Grand Inquisitor. The dialogue between Jesus and his captor is a kind of gloss on the story of the temptations in Matthew 4. According to Dostoyevsky, in the three temptations Jesus resists the three appealing strategies for Messiahship offered by the Grand Inquisitor—miracle, mystery, and authority.

The Grand Inquisitor, who represents the power of the church, can't quite understand Jesus' reticence. After all, suggests Dostoyevsky, the sanctions by which the church holds believers in steadfast obedience are precisely those three—miracle, mystery, and authority.

Influenced by Dostoyevsky's story I used my sermon to write a pointed reminder to the church of the twentieth century, and most especially to the congregation where I was serving my internship. I reminded us that in our time, as in Jesus' time, we are always tempted to use gimmicks or power or false authority to persuade people to believe. Therefore, I suggested, we are called like Jesus to resist those temptations and to live a life of sacrificial service.

"Not bad," I thought.

"Bad," thought the Teaching Assistant of the preaching class, one Joseph Hough. Surprisingly, despite his criticism of my sermon, Hough went on to become a distinguished scholar and teacher and until his retirement, President of Union Seminary in New York. So perhaps he knew what he was talking about.

What he was talking about was that I completely misinterpreted the story of the temptation in Matthew's Gospel. The story of the temptations in Matthew's Gospel, said Hough, was not a story of the temptations that beset us, either as individuals or as a church. The story is the story of the temptations that beset Jesus—it is a story of messianic temptations, and it sets out to answer a different question than the one I asked. Not "Who are believers?" or "Who is the church?" but "Who is this Messiah? Who is this Jesus?"

II.

In many ways the reading from Mark's Gospel relieves us of the temptation to think that the temptation story is about us. Here in its starkest form is a story about Jesus. It's the middle story in three brief stories about the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, maybe even his coronation as Son of God. In the first story Jesus is baptized

and hears God's voice: "You are my son; in you I am well pleased."

In the third story Christ makes his inaugural address, stunningly brief and to the point: "The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel."

And in this middle story, Jesus validates his own role as preacher and embodiment of God's Kingdom: he resists the power of Satan.

There are no details about the particular temptations. There is no description of Jesus' agony. Just a simple portrait: Satan and the beasts on one side; Jesus and the angels on the other. Temptation overcome, the King, fresh from his coronation at Jordan, begins his reign.

III.

What helps us about this Lenten story is that it concentrates on Jesus more than on us. What also helps us about this Lenten story is that it concentrates on triumph more than on regret. Right after the temptation story, Jesus begins his ministry, telling people to "repent and believe in the Gospel." But the reason to "repent" is not in hopes that the Gospel may come along to rescue us. The reason to repent is that the Kingdom is already breaking in, and that in the wilderness Jesus has already triumphed over the forces of sin and evil—not for the last time, perhaps, but decisively, irrevocably.

For years I thought it was odd that when John Milton had finished his monumental poem "Paradise Lost" (the epic that tells how "sin came into this world and all our woe"), and he came to write "Paradise Regained," he didn't turn to the story of Calvary or to the story of the empty tomb. He turned to the story in the wilderness—Jesus' resistance to temptation reverses Adam and Eve's subjection. Adam and Eve and their offspring, John Milton and we, have been cast into the wilderness, but now in the wilderness, by his faithfulness, Jesus triumphs and restores us to a new and richer garden.

Now I think Milton has caught a very important part of the gospel story. From the beginning of his ministry to the end, whether in visible success or in suffering and shame, Jesus is Messiah and has begun his messianic reign. Mark tells us that his book is about the beginning of the good news of Jesus, Messiah, Son of God. He is Son of God already; the kingdom is breaking in; there is no question of the outcome of our story—it will be the victory of God.

I quote Mark Douglas who wrote not only that we should place Lent in context, but that perhaps we should displace it altogether:

My principle argument against Lent is that it encourages us to think about living as if we are on the way to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—to place ourselves in a "time before" both in order to more fully appreciate those events. I, on the other hand, think that we are called to think about living *after* crucifixion and resurrection—to place ourselves in the "time between" resurrections in order to more fully understand our own inaugurated 2000 or so years ago."¹

As I grow older I sometimes find myself settling into a kind of inappropriate sentimentality. It comes at those moments when I reflect on difficult moments in my

life—the illness of my spouse, the disappointments of a child. I am tempted to wallow in the emotions that were perfectly proper to the former fears and old distresses. I almost conjure up in myself the grief and fear that marked those moments.

Then I remember that in fact the illness has passed; the children are fine. Wallowing in old fears in the presence of sustaining grace is just self-indulgent. For now, thank God, I know how the story turns out.

Lent can be a kind of exercise in sentimentality. Will Jesus overcome his temptations? Will our sins ever be forgiven? For forty days we pretend that we don't know how the story came out so that we can grieve appropriately as if we were citizens of an old creation that has long since passed away.

It's just false consciousness to pretend that we don't know how Lent turns out. It turns out in reconciliation and triumph—every single time. The danger with the cycle of the liturgical year is that sometimes it seems to suggest that our lives are bound always to go in circles, too. February—time to feel awful again.

Remember that this is the first Sunday in Lent. Sunday, the third day, the day of resurrection. Were it not Sunday we would not care a fig about ashes or abstinence or Lenten discipline. Were Christ not risen, Lent would be simple silliness. We are penitent only because we know full well how the story comes out.

Sometimes, in our sentimental mode, we think maybe if we can confess our sinfulness with enough penitence and regret, Jesus will do something about it. But of course Jesus has already done something about it; so at Lent we confess our sinfulness with penitence—and joy.

Notes

1. Mark Douglas, "Protagonist's Corner," *Journal for Preachers* 32, no.3 (Easter, 2009), 47.