

## First Sunday in Lent

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Text: Mark 1: 9–15

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To be honest, when I received this passage to give a sermon on, I was kinda disappointed. Yes, I do get to pick which Sunday to preach, and therefore, which passage to preach on—so I did *choose* to preach on this passage. But I was disappointed because there is just such little detail in this passage. It really gets straight to the point. In Matthew, we get to hear about the different trials and tricks and the way that Jesus one-ups Satan, and here, all we get is that that the Spirit sent Jesus to the wilderness...and he was tempted by Satan. And that's it. Nonetheless, Mark is really interesting in the way that the “temptation” story is crafted and its role within a larger narrative.

As I see it, this passage (though short) is composed of three main movements. First, we see the component of identity (the Beloved) being affirmed. Next, we shift into the temptation, the challenges and trials Jesus faces. Last, we close off with the proclamation of the good news. Identity-testing-good news. Identity-testing-good news. Keep that in mind because we'll go back to that later.

### Identity

We begin Mark 1: 9–15 with Jesus' baptismal story. At LCMNU, we talk a lot about baptism and the beloved identity, but I am going to further flesh this idea out. In the passage prior to this one, we learn that John has already begun baptizing people in Judea and Jerusalem. He preaches baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In other words, baptism is a ritual of immersion and a symbol of incorporation into this transformed community that John is announcing—a community shaped by baptism and repentance. In verse 7, John says how someone more powerful than he is coming along. And this someone will not necessarily baptize them with water, but with the Holy Spirit. We then immediately read about Jesus' baptism, suggesting that he is the someone more powerful than John. In Jesus' baptism, the Spirit makes an appearance. While the scripture doesn't make it clear exactly *who* can hear the Spirit's voice, we know that the voice says *You are my Beloved*. As John predicts, the Spirit plays an essential component in the baptism, and the Spirit directly highlights the importance of belovedness in relation to baptism. Furthermore, the importance of belovedness in relation to how we understand ourselves through the lens of our baptism (aka baptismal identity). This turning around now becomes connected to the belovedness affirmed by God and the Spirit.

This moment showcases how we are God's beloved, and that the physical act of baptism through water emphasizes and reminds us of this fact. In 21theo, we've talked a lot about what it means to be beloved. Ultimately it comes down to the idea that God's unconditional love and care for us informs our sense of identity. I am a daughter, I am a student, I am a research assistant—but I am first and foremost loved. Through baptism (but even more so, through Jesus and God), we gain a sense of identity. This identity (which grounds us) becomes important for when we face challenges.

## Testing

Here's where the next section kicks in: temptation. Some theologians prefer the word testing. This can also be understood by a simple word: challenges.

First, let's analyze how "temptation" is depicted.

As a kid, this was a section that provoked some anxiousness in me as I sat in the pews. I would put myself in the passage and think to myself, *could I survive in the wilderness? Could I do 40 days? Wouldn't I get hungry?* Big questions were being asked. As a child who was very averse to the outdoors, this idea of wilderness scared me. But I think to myself now and ask: what is the wilderness here? Initial responses may be that wilderness is something scary, it represents the unknown, the unfamiliar. However, this time in the wilderness was also a moment of solitude, potentially of peace due to the minimal distractions. Furthermore, the Spirit brings Jesus out, so Jesus' experience in the wilderness is not supposed to be something overtly manipulative or calculating.

The way that this "temptation story" is set up, the wilderness is something separate from the real world. In these 40 days, Jesus is separated from the rest of society (systems) and has moments of intentionality where, as it is presented, he is *focused* on not being tempted by Satan. According to Matthew, Satan tries to tempt him in 3 different ways: (1) tell the stones to become bread; (2) throw yourself down so that the Lord may catch you, and (3) worship Satan.

What stands out to me in this section, is that it makes it seem like there are clearly delineated moments in time when a person becomes tempted. Almost like a, *well, from 1-3pm today you WILL be tempted.* Or a banner that says, "Temptation Here! Stay alert!" It's like you'll *know* when you're "being tested".

*What is "temptation"?*

How I see it, "temptation" or testing doesn't often come in these big, specified moments. Oftentimes, we are tested during moments of decision-making; when we must make decisions, decisions which sometimes seem rather insignificant in the moment. Decisions about choosing how to spend your time, who your surround yourself with, how you act around others. Sometimes these can be major decisions, most times they are not. It's a little less melodramatic than it's presented in Mark.

Furthermore, this passage makes it seem like in these decision-making moments, there will be a clearly and obviously "good" choice and a "bad" choice and nothing in between. And that you have the ability to know what the good choice is and to make it. Again, sometimes this is the case, don't get me wrong, and we know what we should do even though it is the more difficult path to take. However, sometimes the clear choice isn't as easy to make. Sometimes, the choices aren't so clearly good versus bad. And so, in these moments, what guides you to make decisions? What guides you when you make decisions if the choices don't have a "pick me, I'm *not* the one being suggested by Satan" sign?

It goes back to identity. And that's why it's so relevant that the identity piece precedes the temptation piece. God doesn't require anything from us. However, recognizing our beloved

identity and the fact that everyone else is also beloved by God is a strong statement. Your beloved identity could compel you to turn outwards from yourself and your self-driven desires, to then act and choose decisions that affirm others belovedness as well as your own.

As a result, this belovedness begins to inform your priorities, your moments of decision-making. It's not about going into moments of "temptation" or decision-making with the mindset of *oh, I'm going to try to avoid temptation*. It's about living your life according to principles (drawn from your faith, beloved identity), and allowing these to guide you when it's time to make a decision. Our beloved identity can prepare us to make hard decisions, and may subsequently help us take the more difficult path that we wouldn't have otherwise.

### **Good News**

Identity-testing; and now good news. To quickly explain:

As you may remember, right before this passage, we learn about John who is baptizing people and demonstrating another way. The verse only says that John is arrested but based on Matthew, Luke, and later in Mark, we know that John is arrested and later beheaded. This is an order given by Herod (sub-king of Galilee within the Roman Empire) because John strongly disapproved Herod's divorce of his wife and then subsequent marriage to his sister-in-law. John was seen as a holy individual who possessed great influence, and that in itself made him a threat against Herod's power. If anything, you'd think that seeing John's rise and subsequent persecution by the Roman empire would convince Jesus to lay low in order to not draw attention. This doesn't happen.

Within the very same sentence where Mark communicates that John has been imprisoned, he also immediately highlights that Jesus is proclaiming the good news of God in Galilee. The actions of the Roman empire fail to scare Jesus into cowardice keeping him from sharing the good news.

*What is the good news?*

You might wonder. There are many ways to conceptualize the "good news" but really the good news is that: through Jesus, we have been liberated from the oppression of other kingdoms. We are no longer enslaved to systems of oppression; to attitudes that tell us what our worth is derived from. The passage holds the promise that the good news, the Kingdom of God is not something unattainable, but something that we can live out in our very present.

Jesus provides another way for how we can live our lives. Once again, this connects back to the beloved identity. By recognizing my beloved identity and allowing that to guide me when I have to make decisions, I strive to live out the good news and the Kingdom of God.

Identity-temptation-good news. This can be reformatted as moments of clarity, moments of challenge, going out into the world, and then repeat. This is what baptism is: immersion, dying to our old self, rising again and starting again, and doing this over and over. Giving thanks for our baptism helps us remember who we are, that we can make it through "tests" of life, and help others do the same.

## Application

As many of you know, I went to Israel and Palestine (specifically, the West Bank) this past August for a couple of weeks through the NU Perspectives program run by Hillel.

In many different ways, this was a transformative experience for me, but it was also pretty difficult. The weeks had their challenges, and so has the time since then and since the war erupted.

Deanna had presented the Perspectives trip as an opportunity to us last January, and while I had heard about this trip years before, I felt really called to apply this time around. You could attribute it to me having just returned from studying abroad, wanting to experience new environments, challenging myself to get out of my comfort zone...and so I applied and got in.

I went on this trip not knowing anyone at all, which was an oddity within the group because most of them knew each other from a variety of places. Nonetheless, I felt very secure in myself, willing to go even if it meant that it might be clique-y with the other participants. To my surprise, it was nothing like that—I got along with all of them so well. I knew that regardless of where I was on the bus, or next to who I sat down for a meal, I would have an enjoyable/fruitful moment. When I've brought this up in conversation, I kinda attribute the fact that we all got along so well as almost a magical property of the experience.

But really, we all made efforts in order to create an environment like that. I can't speak for everyone else, but I can speak for myself: As has become more evident in the mainstream, there is a wide berth of opinions related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. My peers in the program were not the exception to that. We spent lots of time together, hearing lots of intense and emotionally provoking talks, *and* also witnessing first-hand contact with these physical places; and the group had great differences in political opinions.

Looking back, I can reflect and say that the “testing” or challenge for me was determining whether I would alienate myself from others due to differences in political opinion. Would I shut away people who thought differently from me or forge friendships with them? This was not encompassed by one melodramatic moment, but by a series of smaller decisions—who would I sit next to? Who would I talk to? How would I perceive conversations?

For me, my decision to forge friendships amidst the highly contentious nature of the trip we were on was motivated by my beloved identity. I didn't know exactly the *right* thing to do, but I allowed my understanding of my own belovedness and the belovedness of others to drive my behavior. In this specific situation and for me, this meant making friends with people different from me. This is really important for me because it allows me to see where people are coming from, and engage with them in and in conversations in a different way. And for me, the good news aspect is encompassed in my efforts to turn outside of myself to be and learn with others.

**Conclusion**

These verses don't seem like much at first glance, but they pack in a lot of content. Identity-testing-good news. This is what baptism is all about. I bring this up again to reiterate that we make choices and decisions...all the time. But our understandings of belovedness can help us make these choices, and ultimately, bring this Kingdom of God right here.