

Lent 1st Sunday “The Kingdom of God is at Hand” Mark 1:15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

The Sundays of Lent bring us back to the very basics of our faith. By tradition the First Sunday in Lent (notice that the Sundays are ‘in’ Lent, not of Lent, they remain always a mini-Easter) launches the season with the temptation of Christ. Today we will read that in Mark, but since it is so short there, we will also get a little context, the baptism and beginning of Jesus ministry. This is good because we get to see the temptation’s connection to the baptism and ministry of Jesus more clearly.

It is easy for the preacher to get hung up in the details of the temptation or the mechanics of the act of temptation. We might preach about the nature of Satan or the methods Jesus uses to overcome the evil one. All those could be good sermons, but I think they might miss the point. I think the whole salvation issue is much easier than this. The point of the first Sunday of Lent is that Jesus won. The devil gave it his best shot and threw everything he had into the battle, and Jesus flat out beat him.

For those of us baptized into Christ, this has a simple but important message. We are on the winning side. Christ has beaten the one foe against which you have no chance. Your immersion into the life of Christ through the water of baptism is an immersion into the victor, into the one who wins the battle, into the Lord of all.

I think part of our problem today is that we do not really have a credible devil who genuinely plagues us. That means we read these stories very differently. Philip Jenkins recently wrote a book about the religion of the Global South in which he noted that post-enlightenment Christians keep trying to grab the rapidly growing churches of the south and commandeer them for their causes in the developed world (*The New Faces of Christianity*). The American Evangelical claims them because they are biblically faithful. The Pentecostal likes them because they talk about the Spirit a great deal. The Liberal sees them as the success of relief programs. The LCMS Lutheran would co-opt them as an ally in the battle against the erosion of Scriptural authority. But none of these really **get** the movement which is spreading across Africa, Asia, and India today.

In the global South, as in the biblical world, belief in spirits and witchcraft are commonplace, and in many places--such as Nigeria, Indonesia, and Sudan--Christians are persecuted just as early Christians were. Thus the Bible speaks to them with a vividness and authenticity unavailable to most believers in the industrialized North. The people of those places read of Jesus defeating Satan and casting out the demons and they rejoice. They rejoice because they are pretty sure that the guy a couple houses down is possessed by a demon and they are afraid of him. When they read of Jesus defeating Satan, they want to be Jesus' friend because they have no way to combat the evil that lives in that house down the street.

Because we have very little or no room for an active demonic presence in our post-enlightenment world view, we hear this sort of a passage very differently than those new believers for whom it was first intended, as this lesson was chosen for this day well over a millennium ago. We see this as a victory over a generic evil, as a triumph which means horrors perpetrated in distant lands have been defeated, things like Nazi's and Pol Pot or Idi Amin. But until you encounter real and personal evil, a personal presence so hair-raising, knee-buckling, gut-wrenching, and strong that you are powerless before it, then you are in danger of not getting the point of this day. Jesus beat the Evil One, the one who has a face, against whom our powers of resistance and willpower are feeble, even laughable.

How can we portray that sort of helplessness to a society which demands and revels in our self-sufficiency? The folks of long ago understood their precarious position, it seems. The preacher did not need to develop this reality. We need help to see this, but do we really need to look too far? The abused child is helpless, so is the elderly person caught in the squeeze of increasing costs and a flat social security benefit. The mentally vulnerable upon whom the scam artists prey experiences this sort of helpless. But even here I am not sure that we have fully encountered the full helplessness of which I speak.

Our temptation is always to blame the person. I think some addicts feel this helplessness before their addiction. But the rest of us are conditioned to look at them in pity and we usually have a sense that they deserved this a little. If they would just admit their problem, they might be able to lick this thing. If they had just listened to their mom a little better, they would not be hooked on this stuff.

No, it seems that it is only before the Devil's ugly handmaiden that we feel this kind of helplessness anymore. It is only before death. We try mightily there too, but the truth is, doctors still lose all their patients eventually and the coldness of death catches up to us all. No one has come up with a cure for dying yet. Maybe the COVID pandemic has allowed us to see this more clearly.

I do believe that C. S. Lewis had it right in the Screwtape Letters. Our obliviousness is not an accident. The devil knows the sort of fear his presence engenders in us, for all the perverse pleasure it brings him. And this fear drives us into the arms of Jesus. So, he abides his time, waiting until death is upon us before he reveals himself, leaving us in our foolish security.

So, why do we observe Lent? What is the proper way to observe Lent? What should our Lenten fast entail? Is it just an extra service on Wednesdays? Is it giving something up for the season? What is a Lent well-observed?

These questions are important. I think our failure to observe Lent is often connected to our weak Easter celebrations. I think the folks in New Orleans, with their elaborate and fervent Marti Gras parties, actually help make their Lenten fast all the stronger.

But our culture does not like to repent. In contrast, the church of the first four centuries wanted to repent all year long, even during Easter season. There is some indication from early Christendom that Lent developed as a way for the Church to say, “**This** is the repentance time and those weeks that follow is the celebration time.” It was not that they needed to **stop** celebrating, they needed to acknowledge that having repented they should now **begin** to celebrate.

What a contrast to our approach to repentance. So, how will we allow for repentance to happen so we can really rejoice in Easter's glory?

And maybe a good Lent always includes some catechesis. This was another root of the season, a time of preparation for baptism.

So what is Lent for? And what would comprise a successful Lenten season?

1. People must understand their need for a savior, which often requires serious/sober introspection, prayer, etc.

2. Their needs be proper celebration of Easter – A Lent disconnected from Easter is problematic, and Easter without Lent is weak. A good Lent leads to a joyful and celebratory Easter.
3. A faithful relationship with Christ is renewed – and brings us back to the basics of our Christianity – the non-essentials are stripped away and we see the structure of our faith, its essentials. Jesus has rescued us from Satan's power.
4. A good Lenten season encourages prayer, considers the needy, and exercises faith in healthy ways.
5. And a good Lenten season encourages fasting. We can fast from singing alleluia's in the season. We might fast from practices or elements of our diet. But these things need to be connected to Jesus giving up His life for you and me. This needs to remind us of what Christ has done and to enable us to participate in the fruits of His sacrifice on the cross.

In our Gospel lesson, we see Jesus first victory over sin, death and the devil. We get these words in the context of the baptism and the ministry of Christ. His baptism and the outpouring of the Spirit at that baptism lead immediately to a victory over Satan. The victory over Satan immediately leads to the ministry of salvation in which the call to repent and believe is proclaimed, the sick are healed, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed. The order of the actions and the actions themselves are important. Jesus acts with Authority and Spirit. He is the Son of God and is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not Jesus clawing his way to the top, not Jesus achieving status, but Jesus living out the status which he properly has and acting on a Spirit-filled directive which flows from what He possesses in full from before the foundation of the world.

That the very next action taken is in battle against the ancient foe is also important. Jesus does not start on the outside and work his way toward the root of the problem. Authorized and empowered, He goes right to the root of the issue, Satan himself. The subsequent ministry, therefore, is not undertaken as a ministry which builds toward the eschatological battle at which the fate of the world is determined. His victory for us was won immediately. The ensuing ministry of the Church is the working out of that victory over Satan, won first in the desert, completed in the cross and empty tomb.

We are not engaged in some cataclysmic struggle whose end we do not know. This is not like Star Wars where we are not sure who will win, the evil emperor or the virtuous hero. The ministry of Christ and the ministry of his church flow out of victorious action against the primary foe. The end of this is determined by the beginning of it.

It is much the same as a journey that is largely determined by whether one turns right or left at a juncture early in the trip. We are witnessing, in what looks like a small event, only two short verses; yet, it is a significant pivot in the history of the world. Satan tempted a man in the wilderness of Judea, and that man did not succumb. Satan's entire kingdom is shaken, cracks start to immediately appear, demons are cast out, lepers are cleansed, sinners are forgiven. Our ministry as a congregation and as His people is simply a continuation of that action. We are bringing into reality what Jesus has done by defeating Satan once in the wilderness and finally and fully with a cross and empty tomb forty days from now.

This is the Gospel we have received to deliver to the community around us and to the whole world of people who have not yet heard. It is life changing, world changing, and death changing.

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (But) How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:13-15, 17)

So, as we contemplate our sins this Lenten season and reflect upon the great work of salvation accomplished for us by God in Christ Jesus, we should think of another "fast," another thing we can forsake. We can forsake our excuses for not sharing this good news. And instead join Jesus on his mission to bring salvation to the world.

This is His victory for us and it is swift, simple, and final. Salvation comes by the already accomplished work of Jesus Christ. No added ingredients necessary. No doubt. Results guaranteed! Received by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!