

1st Sunday in Lent – 2/26/12 – HRLC

Text – Mark 1: 9-15

Temptations = Spirit Quest

I ran across this description of today's gospel reading while I was on Study Leave:

“After Jesus is confirmed as God's beloved son in his baptism, God then sends Jesus into the wilderness to face temptation. Jesus refuses the devil's offers and remains faithful to his mission as God's Son.”

Sounds like a television synopsis of your favorite show, doesn't it? Main character goes through initiation process, is sent on special mission, and triumphs – all in 13 verses, without any commercials.

Is that really what Mark is about on this day as he describes our Lord's wilderness experience? Is this what our faith is boiled down to – television type synopsis, so that the stories are palatable and don't challenge us to live out the faith we proclaim we have?

If we think so, then I would like to suggest that we had better look again. To do so, however, I would like to leave Mark and switch our attention to the temptation parable as told in the Gospel of Luke. Mark, you see, is short on what we need for there are no post-resurrection appearances at the end (there's barely a resurrection!) and there's no pre-baptismal stories – no shepherds, no wisemen, no census, no manger, no angels, no nothing. It just starts with the baptism – it's Mark's nativity scene!

I would suggest that we must look at what Luke presents us within the context of our Lord's life and the world in which he lived in order to understand – that it is a narrative with very deep meanings, and when we miss the deep meanings we miss out on life itself.

Pull out your Bible, for a change. I want to go through some of the context that leads up to the Lukan version of the temptation. Open to page 52 of the New Testament portion. Luke tells us (in verse 1) that he is going to present an *“orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us.”* You know from this point on that everything that is said, everything that is presented, has a meaning. There is a reason for everything that Luke puts down. To understand what he is saying to us, we have to understand why he is saying it and what is going on all around both Luke and Jesus.

Luke then presents his prologue to what he is going to be telling us. In the prologue we are introduced to some of the characters that will be important, specifically John (through Elizabeth and Zechariah) and Mary. Within this prologue we hear the first strains of what will be a recurring theme – it comes from Mary (perhaps the most important person in Jesus' life – as boys' mothers almost always tend to be). The theme is this:

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

We call it the Magnificat. It is one of the most radical calls to revolution ever voiced by humanity. It is the song that Mary sang, from before he was born – and most likely over and over again during his childhood, while he was growing up.

Turning to chapter 2, the story proper begins. It is a story set within a political context; the political context of empire and of living within a nation that is occupied by outside forces. The birth of Jesus is set within a specific action within that political context – a census. A political activity designed to determine how many young men there were that could be conscripted (which was not a problem for the conquered Judean population) and to discover how many people there were to tax, in order to pay for the army into which young men were being conscripted.

Luke tells us that the main characters within this political context (the powerful, who will be brought down from their thrones) are Augustus (ruler of Rome, Prince of Peace, God from God, Redeemer, Liberator and Savior) and Quirinius (the Governor of Syria). Later we are told that those in the immediate area who are powerful as John is preaching and as Jesus begins his ministry are Herod Antipas (the puppet king of Rome), and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas (also serving at the behest of Rome).

You might tell me none of this is important, but I would have to ask: “if it is not important, why does Luke – who is laying out an orderly account – include it? Why is it so important that we know who the cast of characters is, and precisely what time it is as things take place?”

Let me tell you a little about this cast of characters, who are now a part of the story of Jesus who is about to embark upon a ministry that will entail walking a road of truth, who is just about to go out into the wilderness.

Annas and Caiphas are not from the legitimate high priestly tradition – they are puppets of the outside empire that has conquered the people. They don't measure up to those who come from the Aaronic or the Levitical priesthood.

Augustus, although considered godly, does not measure up to Caesar, and Tiberius is even worse.

As for Herod Antipas, he is one of the inept sons of Herod the Great. Herod could not decide which of his sons to recommend as his successor, so he recommended both of them (the reason why Luke tells us that Herod rules Galilee and his brother Philip rules Iturea and Trachonitis). Herod is so incompetent that the people revolted against him and for over 10 years the rebellion went on. Finally, all of Herod's troops were kicked out of the rebel stronghold of Sepphoris and a great victory was celebrated.

In response to this celebration, Herod sought help from Rome and in the year 6AD the Roman troops provided Herod with "shock and awe" to overcome the insurgents. They stormed the city and killed every man, woman and child – and when that was done they burned the city to the ground. It smoldered for years – even as workers moved in to rebuild it.

The import of this for our story is that Sepphoris was only 4 miles from Nazareth and when it was razed Jesus was about 10 years old. His father, Joseph, probably helped with the rebuilding – and the teenaged Jesus could see the smoke of the ruined city over the hills outside of Nazareth as he grew in years (as his mother, Mary, sang her theme – the mighty will be brought down and the lowly will be lifted up).

Is it any wonder that when he is ready to begin his ministry Jesus seeks out the most radical prophet there is – John, called the Baptist, who is preaching a message of repentance in the Jordan rift. Remember John? He was introduced to us in the prologue – Elizabeth said that he leaped for joy in her womb as Jesus drew near. (Do you think that might be apocryphal?).

John has gone out to the feral space, the rift that is not controlled by the mighty, the boundary

between urban and wilderness. And in this place he has addressed a message of intervention to an addicted, and addictive, system. What John is proposing is not a short course on centering prayer. Rather, he is calling for radical personal and political change. He is not unlike Martin Luther King Jr., as he moved beyond civil rights and into economic rights. He insults those who come to hear (You brood of vipers!) and disregards their heritage (Do not even claim Abraham as ancestor!).

He turns the modus operandi of the empire on its ear and was not afraid to get very specific concerning what he thought needed to be done. If you have two coats, give one away (he's not kidding and he is not talking spiritually). He tells tax collectors to collect no more than what is prescribed, and instructing soldiers not to extort money by threat. Is there any wonder that they killed him? His death was the consequence of the ministry choices that he made.

Such has always been the case with prophets – if they could not be bought, if they could not be tamed, then they had to be killed. Even in the modern day.

This is the one, Luke tells, with whom Jesus aligns himself. Why are we told this? Luke wants us to know that Jesus will face consequences later (because of his ministry choices) just as John had faced consequences. By submitting himself to John's baptism, Jesus is aligning himself with John's message – it is the torch that he picks up after John is beheaded.

Notice, at this point, that Luke gives us what might be called an "aside". The text reads better without the last 1/3 of chapter 3, but Luke's point isn't made as well. In this section Luke gives us two pertinent pieces of information: Jesus is about 30 years old when he begins his ministry (he is the only one to give us this little tidbit) and Luke gives his version of Jesus' genealogy – moving from Jesus backward, all the way to Adam (whom he describes as Adam, son of God).

Once again, the genealogy is important. It tells us the immediate context of Jesus experience in the wilderness. The Spirit Quest that Jesus undergoes evokes the dreaming of his ancestor Jacob. Additionally, it is a time that he wrestles with spirits and traces his ancestors' footsteps – trying to reconcile what has taken place in his life and in the journey of his people. As he is about to begin his ministry Jesus is looking for answers to

the question of what has gone wrong, and how can it be set right.

The wilderness can be a scary place. Ever been lost in it? Ever been in the woods, or out in the desert, and not know which way to go or how to get out. I have. Demons beset you from all sides. So it is with our Lord.

The three temptations are actually visions of three fateful wrong turnings in the history of the people

Following his baptism we are told that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and he enters the wilderness where he is beset by the devil – his devils. This is not a solo story. It is the story of every young man who has gone on a Vision Quest. You see the path upon which you (or your people) have traveled, and the one that lies before you. The purpose of the quest is to gain the knowledge that comes with this insight.

Thus it is with Jesus. He has the first of his visions, the first place that his people went astray. It is evocative of the Exodus. It is a retelling of the manna story, the narrative of Sabbath Economics. You see, the manna story isn't about bread; it's about trust. It's not about getting fed. It's about whether you can follow God's instructions or not.

The story of the manna is about trusting God, rather than accumulating. It is the first place where the people went wrong.

Our Lord's second vision is of worldly kingdoms. It's a reflection on 1 Samuel 8 and Judges 9. The Hebrews have been told to live as an alternative to empire in a non-oppressive tribal confederation. They choose to throw all of that away so that they "can be like other nations." It's the story of God liberating and the people choosing slavery, over and over again.

The people had once again been invited to trust God, and they had chosen to opt for another leader. It's the second place where the people went wrong.

Finally, Jesus has a vision of the third place where the people have gone astray: it is the temple. Specifically, it is a vision of the temple cult. The choice is between false religion and true religion and is a living out of many of the Old Testament Prophetic instructions. It is specifically a vision of Jeremiah 7, where the people are told: "*Do not trust in these idle words: The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. Amend your ways ... and do justice.*"

The people have been invited to be involved in hesed and mishpat and tzedekai, in works of compassion and righteousness and justice, and they have opted for another lifestyle.

Why is the empire in power? Why is the leadership of the people carried out by a puppet? Why is the temple overseen by thugs? Why did Jesus see the smoke of Sepphoris, the city that had been razed, all during his teenage years?

The people have disregarded Jubilee. They have suffered because of the consequences of their decisions. It is not a punishment by God. Rather, it is a result of throwing away the relationship that they had with God and grasping after other self-destructive relationships that the world offers.

And, the choice that is before our Lord, and before the people. Luke sets it forth in two words, that sound alike: *mimesis and mimosis*. They really say it all. To engage in Mimesis means to follow in the way – to engage in a relationship with God that exhibits love for God, compassion for others and care for creation. To engage in mimosis means to continue to reproduce the pathologies around you.

Mimesis ... mimosis – the choice is a simple one. It is the choice that Jesus puts before the people over and over again, beginning with his Nazareth sermon and ending with the Great Commission.

Follow the way (walk the road of truth) ... reproduce the pathologies around you (engage in the easy road of the world). The choice was theirs and the choice is ours.

Engage in the empire of the world ... be committed to the realm of God. The choice was theirs and the choice is ours.

Embrace the economic of the world and its message of scarcity and looking out for yourself ... live life in the economic of God and its message that life is filled with abundance but that we need to learn to share. The choice was theirs and the choice is ours.

There are two roads that lie before us. Which one will we take? Amen