

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 02/18/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

First Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, February 18th

Mark 1:9-15

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Impelled by the Spirit

The lectionary text for the First Sunday in Lent covers the baptism of Jesus, His testing in the wilderness, and the launch of His ministry in Galilee where He preaches the Good News. Some argue these events represent a new exodus in which Jesus is following in the footsteps of Israel's journey. The journey through the Red Sea (baptism), 40 years in the wilderness (40 days in the wilderness), and the promised land (the Good News). The Baptism of Jesus (vv.9-11) was featured in the lectionary just a few weeks ago on Sunday commemorating the Baptism of the Lord. The beginning of Jesus' ministry was in the lectionary even more recently on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany. This commentary will focus on what happens after Jesus was baptized by John – the so-called Temptation of Jesus. When compared to the other synoptics, Mark is sparse on details, yet this short text reveals much that is relevant to us today as we journey through this Lenten season.

Mark 1:9-15 Commentary

The lectionary text concludes the introduction of the Gospel in which Mark begins with the public ministry of John the Baptist and a contrasting parallelism between John and Jesus.

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Verses 9-11 were addressed in the commentary for January 7, 2024.

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

In v.10, we read how Jesus *immediately* saw the heavens being torn open the Holy Spirit descending upon Him like a dove as He came up out of the baptismal water. Mark states how the Spirit *immediately drove* Jesus out into the wilderness. The adverb "immediately" (*euthys*) is a feature of Mark's Gospel. He uses this adverb to link events together and helped by sparse details, it creates the characteristic breathless pace. Mark thus links the role of the Spirit that descended during baptism to the agent that drove out into the wilderness. In some translations, such as the New International Version (NIV), it is rendered as the Spirit "sent" Jesus out into the wilderness.

The use of "drove" in the ESV gives a better sense of the meaning of *ekballō* – to drive out, to force to go away or go out. Where *ekballō* is used in Mark, it almost invariably used in the context of casting out demons: (1:12, 34,

39, 43; 3:15, 22–23; 5:40; 6:13; 7:26; 9:18, 28, 38; 16:9, 17). When the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, it had a transformational effect. It was not a benign event. Perhaps the New American Standard Bible (NASB) rendering best captures the impact of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus: “*the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness.*” Impel is defined as to drive, force, or urge someone to do something. *Impel* is perhaps best understood when compared to *compel*. Compel is more about constraining someone in a way which they yield to do what one wishes. Impel, on the other hand, means to provide a strong force, motive, or incentive towards a certain end. This difference is key. The Spirit impelled Jesus but did not compel Him. The Spirit descended upon Jesus and worked within Him where Jesus’ felt the need to go out into the wilderness. It also expresses the idea that this was not a simple decision free of any angst.

¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

The term wilderness (*erēmos*) refers to a desolate, uninhabited place. It is the same word used to describe the wilderness in which John appeared. Jesus must have gone further out into the wilderness beyond any people who came out to see John. Forty days is often associated with intense spiritual experience. It alludes to the forty days and nights Moses spent on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18) and Elijah in the desert (1 Kings 19:8,15). The forty days may also allude to the testing of Israel for forty years wandering in the wilderness. The inclusion of wild beasts is the only descriptor added by Mark to this short narrative that gives his readers an understanding of the fierce nature of this experience. Some argue at the time of writing, Nero was having Christians torn apart by wild animals. Perhaps there is an allusion here to Psalm 91:11-13:

*¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.*

*¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.*

*¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.*

It is safe to conclude Jesus’ time in the wilderness was not analogous to a modern-day retreat experience.

While rendered as “tempted,” *peirazō* can also mean a time of trial or a time of being tested. To tempt someone is to hope for failure whereas to test someone is to hope for success.

*¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying,
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

Verses 14-15 were just in the lectionary for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 24, 2021. Mark clearly connects the wilderness experience of Jesus as a time of preparation for His ministry. The baptism was the commission, the testing in the wilderness was the basic training. During baptism, the identity of Jesus was revealed, and the Holy Spirit empowered Him for His ministry.

The event that initiates Jesus’ public ministry was the arrest of John the Baptist. The location chosen for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry was back in Galilee.

Reflection and Application

Unlike the other synoptics, there are no specific details of what happened during Jesus’ testing in the wilderness. It is sometimes difficult to focus on a text devoid of details when other, more detailed texts exist. Yet despite being sparse on the details, Mark still packs a lot into only five verses (9-13). When we tease out each word it reveals much.

First, Mark's account reveals the nature of the influence of the Holy Spirit on Jesus. In both Luke (4:1) and Matthew's (4:1) accounts, we read how Jesus was simply "*led by the Spirit*" into the wilderness. These accounts do not communicate the intensity of Jesus must have experienced the Spirit's influence which ultimately impelled Him to go into the wilderness. How do we experience the Holy Spirit? A gentle nudge here and there or a force that impels us? This difference is down to our receptiveness.

Second, Jesus is being tempted by Satan in the presence of wild animals and angels. A visual image emerges of two opposing forces on either side of Jesus. Satan and the wild animals are on one side with the Holy Spirit and the angels on the other. While Satan is tempting Jesus, this experience is being used by God to test and prove Jesus in preparation for His upcoming ministry. In our life trials, the equivalent of the wild animals may be all too obvious but there will also be the equivalent of the angels if we look for them. Testing is never about revealing what we cannot do, but rather enabling us for what we can do.

Third, Mark reveals beyond this text how Jesus would continue to return to wilderness throughout His ministry. Unlike this defined period of preparation, the subsequent wilderness experiences were shorter periods where Jesus would withdraw to desolate places to be enabled in His ministry. These occasions were times of seclusion, reflection, and prayer as Jesus communed with the Father. There is a clear rhythm present in the Gospels of how Jesus would engage in ministry then withdraw from the world for solitude and prayer, and then reengage in His ministry with the world. Jesus also taught His disciples to do the same. How effective are we at instituting this same rhythm into our lives and ministries? What have we learned from the wilderness experiences of our lives? How do we integrate the physical wilderness that is within reach of our physical abilities and our physical proximity into the rhythm of our spiritual lives?

The lectionary text gives us much to reflect on during this Lenten season. One thing to remember, however, is this text reveals that unlike Israel, Jesus did not fail in the desert. For us this means, "*... we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:15-16).



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