

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 18, 2024
10am

Text: Mark 1:9-15

Theme: The Shadow of Temptation

[prayer]

Today we begin our Lenten series, *Song of the Shadows*. The series is named for the district cantata that United Methodists from around our area are preparing for Palm Sunday. Six CUMC members are singing in the cantata; we will have more information to share in the coming weeks.

[pause]

Though we avoid exploring the times and places in our lives marked by shadows and darkness, these challenging moments can be a means for God to lead us into the dawn of new opportunities and fresh starts. In his journey from the wilderness to the cross, Jesus experienced moments of gathering shadows and distinct darkness. During this season of Lent, we join him on this journey. Together we will explore the “shadows” that hide in the corners of our lives. We will confront the darkness of death. We will “repent and believe the good news” as often as is necessary. We can do this difficult work because we know how Jesus’ story ends. And because we know how Jesus’ story ends, we know how our stories end – in the miracle of resurrection and the light of eternal salvation.

Today we begin this work with a return to the baptismal waters. This is how Mark introduces his gospel – not with a birth, but with a baptism. Immediately after Jesus is baptized, Mark tells us the Holy Spirit forces Jesus into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke have similar stories in their gospels. They describe in dramatic detail the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness – temptations to abuse his authority and power as Messiah (cf. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). But Mark devotes only two sentences to this trial period in Jesus’ life: “He was in the wilderness for

forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him” (Mark 1:12-13 CEB).

Mark mostly leaves Jesus’ wilderness experience up to our imaginations. But the fact that the temptation immediately follows Jesus’ baptism gives us a powerful clue to the nature of the temptation he faced.

As Jesus is coming out of the Jordan, he hears a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness” (v. 11). These words are a reference to Psalm 2:7:

*“I will announce the Lord’s decision:
He said to me, “You are my son,
today I have become your father.”*

The psalm is depicting a royal adoption. When a king of Israel was anointed and ascended the throne, he became a “son of God.” Jesus’ baptism is *his* royal anointing; the very word Messiah/Christ means “anointed one.” But Jesus does not receive the title “Son of God” from human beings. He receives it directly from the Father. His identity is formed by the words of God alone: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (NRSVUE).

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the disciples never once refer to Jesus as the Son of God. Do you know who does? Unclean spirits (5:7), the religious authorities (14:61), and a Roman soldier (15:39) – the very powers and principalities that will resist the kingdom Jesus establishes. “Son of God” is a statement of Jesus’ divine identity. But “Son of God” also foreshadows the tribulation he will face as he lives into his identity.

This is perhaps why the Holy Spirit chases him into the wilderness. One commentator writes, “The Spirit...becomes what ancient Celtic Christians dubbed a ‘wild goose,’ driving Jesus out into the wilderness, hissing and nipping at his heels.”¹ The Spirit is not always a gentle, docile dove. She is also a great disruptor, tearing the heavens apart and setting Jesus on a path that leads to a cross.

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/13/wild-beasts-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-1>

The wilderness becomes Jesus' proving ground, a rite of passage that will test his spiritual mettle. Just as Israel spent forty years wandering in the desert, Jesus will now spend forty days doing the same. Israel's wilderness years were an abject failure. God's chosen people complained bitterly, argued amongst themselves, and mistrusted the words of God. In a moment of extreme spiritual weakness, when they were convinced the LORD had abandoned them, they cast a golden calf as a surrogate god (Exod 32-34). Israel fell prey to the chief temptations that plague us in the wilderness of our lives: Fear and doubt.

The question at the heart of Mark's story is this: Will Jesus fall prey to the same temptations? Will he doubt the words of his Father in heaven? Or will he believe they are true, redeem Israel's failure, and chart a more faithful path for humanity?

[pause]

When Jesus arrives at the edge of the Jordan to be baptized, he is just a face in the crowd. Unlike the other gospel accounts, John the Baptist does not single Jesus out as the Messiah. Instead, Jesus is baptized anonymously, like every other person on that riverbank. He is without sin, yet something compels him to descend into the water. And when he emerges and the heavens open and God's voice thunders His message of love and pride, the words are for Jesus' ears alone. No one else on that riverbank hears what the Father has to say; only Jesus hears it.

And what Jesus hears is what he struggles to affirm in the wilderness. God tells him that he is God's beloved Son...and then the Spirit drives him into the wilderness to test the strength of that conviction. The temptation that Jesus faces is the temptation to question the divine identity that God has given him. His ability to resist this temptation will determine whether he has the strength to bear the cost of the vocation he has been given as the Son of God.

Our baptisms are not very different from Jesus'. While the family of God stands witness and the minister proclaims our belovedness, it is in the privacy of our hearts that the Holy Spirit moves. It is in the privacy of our hearts that the Spirit affirms the truth of our identity as a child of God. The water may be blessed, but it is not magic; neither are the words. It is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that

initiates us into God's family and assures us of our new identity: We are now a child of God.

The greatest temptation we face is the temptation to believe this is not true. This is at the root of every other temptation. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we hear Satan, our Accuser, whisper the words the serpent whispered in the garden: "Did God *really* say?" (Gen 3) Did God *really* say that you are His beloved son? Did God *really* say that you are his beloved daughter?

This poisonous question begets some of our worst inclinations. It sows the seeds of fear and doubt so that we end up misplacing our identity in Jesus. We place our identity in the things we do or have not done, the things we own or do not own, the people who love us or do not love us – anywhere other than the unconditional love of God.

But through Jesus we have been given a name, an identity, a worth, and a dignity that is grounded in the eternal and unconditional love of God. As the prologue to John's gospel states:

"Those who believed in his name,
he authorized to become God's children,
born not from blood
nor from human desire or passion,
but born from God." (John 1:12-13)

[pause]

Mark ends this story unit with Jesus' first sermon: "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" (v. 15). Or in more traditional language: "Repent, and believe" (NRSV). But I like the Common English Bible's rendering of "believe" as "trust." Trust gets to the heart of what it means to both repent and to believe.

Repent – *metanoia* – means to change our minds. In Scripture this does not mean a change in thought or opinion. To change one's mind is to change one's being – to reorient our inner compass back to our true north. When we repent from our sins, we acknowledge the ways that we have turned away from God. And so,

repentance is fundamentally about re-turning to God. If our greatest temptation is to mistrust what God has said about our identity in Jesus, then repentance is the act of re-turning to the Source of our belovedness, re-trusting what that Source has to say about who we are and Whose we are. It is only when we are confident in our belovedness that we can find the strength to examine our brokenness and allow the Spirit of God to heal us back into wholeness.

In this examination we re-turn once more to our identity and vocation: We are children of God. As the children of God, we follow in the footsteps of the Son of God. As disciples of Jesus, we walk the Way of Jesus. We will face our own wilderness trials and tribulations. We will dwell in the shadow of temptation. But we do not suffer without hope. Instead, we suffer in expectation of our deliverance and resurrection. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans,

“All who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons and daughters. You didn’t receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, “Abba, Father.” The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God’s children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God’s heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.” (Rom 8:14-17)

On Ash Wednesday I shared the traditional invitation to Lenten observance; I will share it again today for those of you who could not be at worship on Wednesday. As we begin these forty days of Lent, I invite you, in the name of the Church, to observe a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word. As you do these things, ask yourself: Whose words do I trust and in Whom have I placed my identity? May the Spirit agree with your spirit this day and always that you are a child of God.

Amen.