

THE 3 TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS  
 (or, “Do YOU Believe That YOU Are  
 Held in God’s Hand?”)  
 Mark 1:9-15  
 March 1, 2009 – Lent 1  
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA – Rock Hill  
 James T. Richardson

**Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)**

- 9 *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*
- 10 *And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.*
- 11 *And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*
- 12 *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.*
- 13 *He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*
- 14 *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,*
- 15 *and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.*

Many people call the wilderness experience of Jesus “The Temptations of Jesus. Today we look at the gospel writer Mark’s account. The two other synoptic gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, both tell a much expanded version of what happened. For some reason, the gospel writer Mark deals with it here in only two verses. But do not be fooled, for while Mark is short on words, he is long on deep theological meaning. And I am indebted to Lamar Williamson for highlighting three very important “clues” concerning this story. [Cf. Williamson, Lamar, Mark, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1983]

**[ I ]**

**THE FIRST CLUE TO THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF**

**THIS STORY IS THE WILDERNESS SETTING ITSELF.**

If you ever visit in the Holy Lands, your tour guide is bound to show you a very desolate area of the wilderness as the place where today’s story occurred. But the truth of the matter is that NOBODY KNOWS WHERE IT WAS!

It is also true that the area of the Holy Land between Jericho and Jerusalem is one of the most desolate, God-forsaken-looking wilderness areas that I have ever seen. It was in that desolate wilderness area that John the Baptizer first appeared preaching a baptism of repentance

for the forgiveness of sins. It was also into that desolate wilderness that Jesus went following his own baptism by John the Baptizer.

This “wilderness clue” points us in the direction of understanding how **conflict and struggle** are basic in dealing or wrestling with temptation.

This “clue” also points us to some Biblical parallels of which the Jews must have thought in terms of “**the forty (40) days**”:

1. Moses fasted for 40 days on Mount Sinai.
2. The Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after they had fled from slavery in Egypt.
3. The prophet Elijah fasted for 40 days on his way to the mountain of God.
4. When the prophet Jonah predicted the destruction of the city of Nineveh, there was a grace period of 40 days for the city to repent.

Perhaps one of the most penetrating points that emerges from this “**wilderness clue**” is the seeming absence of God. The wilderness is the dwelling place of forces that are hostile to God. The late great 20<sup>th</sup> century American theologian PAUL TILLICH has a sermon on today’s passage in which he plays the word “**loneliness**” over against the word “**solitude.**” (cf. 20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Vol. X, p. 75)

Perhaps you think that you could do without people.  
Perhaps you think that you could do without family.  
Perhaps you think that you could do without anyone.

BUT, do you think that you could do without God?  
What a terrible place it would be without God!  
[And for me, that was one of the points that I got out of Jean Paul Sartre’s 1944 play entitled “No Exit.”]

*(Do you ever think about things like this?)*

Another thing that I wonder about is this:

How do you handle the story of Jesus being on the cross and crying out:

***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”***

Do you believe that God is ever absent?

Do you believe that God ever forsakes a person?

Now, I know that some of you are bound up in vocational turmoil with heavy decisions about your work.

And I know that some of you are aching terribly from rejection and repulsion and broken relationships of various kinds.

And I know that some of you are going through that valley of the shadow of death involving yourself and those whom you love.

**But hear this Good News from Holy Scripture:**

**GOD IS NEVER ABSENT FROM US!**

When in the desolate, evil, wilderness experiences of life, GOD IS THERE!

And that is true even if we can sense it only in the form of ministering angels!

**GOD IS THERE!**

The first clue to the theological significance of today's story in Mark is the wilderness setting itself.

**[ II ]**

**THE SECOND CLUE TO THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

**OF THIS STORY IN MARK IS THE VERB "TO TEMPT" or "TO TEST."**

It is from this verb that the usual name of the story comes: "The Temptations of Jesus."

The gospel writer Mark is very clear in saying that **it is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit**, who drives Jesus out into the wilderness following his baptism.

It is NOT the Holy Spirit,

it is NOT Yahweh God who tempts Jesus.

But it is God who places Jesus there in the wilderness.

Lamar Williamson writes: "...God uses harsh means, including the very powers of hell, to accomplish redemptive purposes." (Ibid, p. 38)

Now, some people say that the verb "to tempt" is best understood to mean "enticement to sin."

Lamar Williamson says that the meaning of the verb "to tempt" really means "putting to the test."

Lamar Williamson writes: **“The present passage is about a test between Jesus and Satan.”** (Ibid, p. 37)

I wonder what you think about that? How do you deal with this personification of evil?

I had a woman tell me one time: **“I have always believed that God never sends you more trouble than God gives you the strength to endure.”**

I will say “AMEN” to that. I wonder if you feel the same way?

The first clue to the theological significance of today’s story in Mark is the wilderness setting itself. The second clue to the theological significance of today’s story in Mark is the verb “to tempt” or “to test.”

### [ III ]

#### **THE THIRD CLUE TO THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

#### **OF THIS STORY IN MARK IS ITS STRUCTURE:**

#### **WHAT MAKES UP THE STORY.**

In addition to Jesus, who is the only human being in the story, there are four other figures:

1. The Spirit of God,
2. Satan,
3. the four beasts, and
4. the ministering angels.

Now, I have intimated that the Spirit is Yahweh God, the God of the Hebrew Bible. The word “Satan” is a Hebrew Bible word for the personification of evil which translates as **“the Adversary.”** We can have some understanding of their roles in the story, can we not? But what do you do with **“THE WILD BEASTS”**?

What was Mark trying to tell us?

Do you think that the wild beasts were an allusion to the peaceful coexistence intended in the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible, and “the wild beasts” were intended to be a comfort to Jesus?

Or, do you think that “the wild beasts” were, in addition to Satan, a part of the desolation and wilderness of the desert scene? Were the wild beasts intended to bring agony to Jesus?

And what about **“THE MINISTERING ANGELS”**?

Do you see them hovering up in the air over Jesus on powerful wings of eagles as many of the great painters have portrayed them?

Or, do you see them kneeling down beside Jesus much like an army medic out on the scene of a battlefield in Iraq?

Lamar Williamson writes:

“Mark frames Jesus’ struggles against hostile power (Satan/beasts) by mentioning the divine providence that sends him to the wilderness at the beginning (the Spirit) and sustains him in the testing at the end (the angels).” [Ibid, p. 37]

One of my heroes in the faith is Piedmont College Professor **Barbara Brown Taylor** who is an Episcopal priest, and who also teaches at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. **She likens *the Season of Lent* to an “Outward Bound” for the soul.** I would guess that the Outward Bound wilderness area closest to Rock Hill is over in North Carolina. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to do foolhardy things, like walk backwards over a precipice with nothing but a rope around your waist or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these is the real test, because while you are doing them you have plenty of people around and lunch in a cooler.

The real test comes when you go “solo.” The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next twenty-four hours. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you really fear. Some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a door to lock and others just wish they had a pillow, but they all find what their pacifiers are---the habits, substances, or surroundings they use to comfort themselves, to block out the pain and fear that are normal parts of being human.

[Taylor, Barbara Brown, Home By Another Way, Boston, Cowley Publications, 1999, pp.66-67]

The forty days of Lent is when you and I find out who we really are. The forty days out in the wilderness is when Jesus found out who he really was.

Basically, the story of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness is the story of Jesus wrestling with what kind of person he was going to be. More importantly, it is the story of Jesus wrestling with what kind of Messiah he was going to be.

Just this past “Ash Wednesday,” we entered the 40 days of the Season of Lent.

Aren’t you anxious to find out who you really are?