

Mark 1:9–15

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the First Sunday in Lent, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 21 February 2012

Here I am, back from Africa, tan and lovely, a little slimmer but not a whole lot. It was just fabulous. We were in Addis Ababa for a month; Carolyn and I were both teaching at the seminary. We made lots of new friends and got acquainted with a group of Sudanese people from right on the border, the Nuer and the Anuak, tall and long and absolutely wonderful. We fell in love with those people. Julie was requesting at least one story, so here's one. The pastor in that congregation is a woman in her thirties who was sold by her brother to an old man in the village so that the brother could raise money for his dowry. She was eleven years old, and so she became a sex slave to this old man. He impregnated her once before he died, and she was left with a young son. Presbyterian missionaries found her and brought her to the Christian faith, and now she is absolutely full of the gospel. It was fun to see what Christ Jesus is doing over there. We had an absolute ball.

Well, we've got some great texts for the First Sunday in Lent, and so we'll head straight into them and mess around a little later if we have time. I don't want to miss anything in these texts, because they're too much fun.

Luther used to say that faith is like a magnet: it attracts its opposite. In this case it attracts temptation. Faith, as trust, is always tested by temptation. So the gospel for this Sunday, Mark 1:9–15, takes us right into it. Jesus comes up out of the baptismal water. He hears the word preached to him, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased," and the Spirit immediately drives him out into the wilderness to be tempted. Word, faith, temptation: it's a sequence we see over and over again in the Scripture, and it is apparent in these texts today.

The supporting texts keep up the same theme. Genesis 22 stands right in the middle of this Sunday, pulsating powerfully like a beating heart. It is one of the great texts in the whole Scripture, so powerful that you can hardly walk by it without being taken up into it. God has promised Abraham and Sarah that they will be the parents of a great nation. Then their first child is born when Abraham is a hundred, as the Scripture puts it, long past the time when it was with Sarah after the manner of women. So he is a child of miracle, growing and

developing, and all of a sudden, in a horrible turnabout, God demands him back, and Abraham goes.

I think Sarah thought he was nuts. In fact, this is the last time Sarah speaks in the story; there are people who think she never talked to him again, and I wouldn't blame her. You'd have to wonder what he was eating or smoking to get the idea that he had to sacrifice that child. Whatever it was, in the end God gave him back. He provided the ram. This text is so sacred, so definitive for the Christian faith, that we can hardly even hang around close to it without being drawn in.

In comparison, Little Jim, as old Bill Hume used to call him, seems like a slow boat on the pond. James is aware of temptation too, of course, but pretty much treats it as a problem that can be solved. So we'll stop in and visit with James 1.

And then, last of all, we have Psalm 25. Frankly, I often wonder how they select these texts. There are so many psalms I would like to put with the temptation narrative and Genesis 22: Psalm 77, for example, which is absolutely gorgeous, or Psalm 51, or Psalm 40. There are any number of candidates with a lot more power. But we'll take Psalm 25 for what it is. It's helpful, even though it would be fun to have something that was a match. I don't suppose there is a psalm to match Genesis 22 and the temptation narratives, but we'll work with what we're given.

Mark 1: Baptized, Tempted, Preaching

First of all, the gospel text for this Sunday is a condensed version of the temptation of Jesus. The whole story has been cut to the minimum. You know the standard theory concerning the sources of the Synoptic Gospels: Mark is one source, and Matthew and Luke have a second source plus their own special materials. The Q source, if that is what's responsible for Matthew's and Luke's longer versions, is quite a bit more developed. Mark has the short form.

Of the three, Matthew is, I think, probably the preferred version. At least it's the one most of us go to when we talk about the temptation narrative. The strange thing about Luke is that the second and third temptations are reversed. He is making an orderly account, but he is following an order I'm not quite sure of. Still, it's Matthew most of us stick with.

Here we're on the banana peel; we're right into it. The voice sets everything in motion. This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He goes to his cousin, John the Baptist, and goes down

into the water to be baptized with all the other sinners. In Matthew there's a little kerfuffle about this, but here it is matter-of-fact. Jesus goes into the water, John baptizes him, he comes up, and the voice speaks.

And that voice, whether Jesus alone heard it or the whole crowd heard it, announces what is beginning here. A ministry is starting. This is Jesus' ordination, and the ordination takes place with these words: "You are my beloved Son." This is the one in whom I am expressing myself to the whole world. This is the one in whom I am coming out into the open. This is the one who reveals my fatherly heart. This is my beloved Son.

So Jesus begins with this endorsement, and his faith attaches to this word. Jesus hears this word, and when he hears it, he takes hold of it, and that is the beginning of his ministry, the beginning of his work. He is now on the way toward Jerusalem and, of course, toward his death. So the voice is cosmically important.

Jesus' faith attaches to this word, and now he's on. Now the word is assailed by temptation, immediately: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." I remember when Gerhard Forde and I were writing *Free to Be*, that little confirmation book on the Small Catechism. We sent it out to be externally reviewed, and one of the college religion professors challenged us: Why would God tempt his own Son, or lead his Son into temptation? He wondered where we got the notion that the Holy Spirit was responsible for this. Well, Mark says so explicitly here.

Faith by its very nature is tempted. It is the assurance of things hoped for. It is an act of trust, and so it is exposed. It is always under attack. Whether the wilderness is some place out in the boondocks, as here, or some economic wilderness, or social wilderness, or inner-city wilderness, faith will always be tempted. Faith is always under attack, and Jesus, as the new Adam, the beginning of the new creation, is going to get his turn right off the bat. He is exposed now.

We don't know from this text what the temptations were. Matthew fills them in beautifully, and Luke too. Mark is content with the fact that he is tempted. So we have to say he is exposed and brought into temptation. And if we don't see any specific temptations in the text itself, the account Mark provides indicates temptation enough. Jesus' ministry begins with these pregnant words: "Now after John was arrested."

They were cousins, as Luke tells us. John the Baptist leaped in the womb, according to Luke, when Jesus, still unborn, arrived on the scene. They were connected in the most intimate sort of way, and so all the Gospels pay very close attention to them. I suppose we can imagine, in a pious or maybe less than pious way, these two talking about what they were going to do when their ministries started. No doubt neither one of them had a clue at the beginning how dramatic it was going to be.

John is the beginning of the gospel of God, according to Mark. He is the forerunner extraordinaire, the one whose presence and preaching announce that all of time has turned. Now John is arrested. The beginning of the gospel of God is in prison, confined to a minimum of square feet, confined in a way that tells him what his end is going to be. Generally speaking, there was no way out of a first-century prison in Israel that did not involve death. No life insurance man is likely to call there. In fact, it appears that all his alternatives have already been used up.

“Now after John was arrested”: there is temptation enough. There’s no devil here, none of the usual trappings of the narrative, but Jesus’ faith is already under attack. His cousin has been arrested. The forerunner has been stopped in his tracks. And it is in this context that Jesus begins to preach. “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased”; the beginning of the gospel of God; and then, when John was arrested, temptation follows, just as certain as can be.

So Jesus begins preaching in this context, and he declares forthrightly what his message will be: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” That is, time has turned. God is drawing near. He has come as near as this very word, the preached word. Jesus as preacher declares this turn, and the turn occurs precisely in the preaching. He is the preached God, the God on two feet, handing out his gifts, declaring and bestowing what he has to give. And what he gives is this: the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the rule of God, the dominion of God. The kingdom of God has drawn as near as this word, and so even now, in the context of temptation, the resurrection has begun.

So we have a temptation narrative, attenuated in Mark, but still full of the power of the gospel. Jesus comes, he begins to preach, he preaches in the context of temptation, and he hands over the gifts precisely there.

Genesis 22: God Will Provide

Now with this we'll move to the supporting texts. Mark has a question here: How can we know the nature of the communication between God and Abraham, which surely was clear enough to move Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, to reassure him of the threefold promise, and then to lead him to sacrifice his own son?

You're right to ask about speculation, because this is one of the mysteries of this text. It is simply overpowering. The story has been worn smooth by the telling. As Gerhard von Rad points out, it is tongue-softened. It has been handed over, told and retold. So it is a story you don't need to apply, a story you don't have to explain, a story you don't have to turn into a summons. It is a story that tells itself.

I've preached on it over thirty times, and I have never preached on this text without the text bringing out someone who has a story that the text itself has interpreted in one way or another. Once, when I was teaching at Luther, one of the Old Testament faculty, Terence Fretheim, announced that this text should not be preached anymore, because it involves child abuse, recommends child abuse, and makes God guilty of child abuse, and so he urged its suspension. By late that afternoon I had been visited by five women in the student body who were incest victims. All of them said the same thing: "If this text goes, I go too."

This text has a way of speaking particularly to people who have seen the underside, who have been brought under attack by those whose life should have sustained them, who have been turned upon in their families. That is much more common than we like to believe. Nearly everybody bears someone, a parent, a neighbor, someone close, who has been a source of great difficulty. Even if we can't explain the temptation or what convinced Abraham to do this, we know this: this kind of thing still happens in families, and people bear the crucifixion of it. When they trust you sufficiently, they'll tell you their narrative: who it was, what it was, and how it happened.

Yes, I don't think he slept very well either, Mark. That's really fun: what it was that possessed him. You can imagine Sarah asking, "Where in the hell did this come from?" and speculating that it was an illusion, an evil illusion. You just can't explain this stuff. By the same token, you meet someone who has been put upon by her father, or a woman like this pastor I met in Ethiopia, who was sold by her brother as an eleven-year-old to an old man who thought of her as a pleasant diversion. You meet people like this all over the place, and the purpose of this text

in the narrative is to give those people a place. That's what it does. It gives them a place to stand. And so the text remains, as powerful a narrative as you'll find.

It is one of those primordial stories, what Carl Jung used to call an archetype, I suppose, because it brings out the inherent tension. Forde used to like to say that children begin to have nightmares when they discover the other side of their parents. I don't know how much time I've spent as a pastor sitting with people in these circumstances, where a father has turned on a son or a son on a father, a mother on a son, a mother on a daughter, a daughter on her mother or father. It is the deepest pain there is in the human community, and it is typical of the Scripture that it goes right there.

So the most important thing here is not to lose that ram caught in the thicket. Whatever moved Abraham to this point, whether it was a demonic temptation or the voice of God, God provided. As Mark points out, it was a sleepless night for Abraham. You hear that conversation on the way up the hill: "Where is the lamb, my father?" And Abraham replies in heartbreak, "God will provide." Neither one of them knew then what God would provide: that there was a ram, that Abraham's hand would be withheld at the decisive moment. So we have the reality of temptation and the reality of promise set side by side.

You're certainly right, Mark, it could have been. This is in the night. Luther says that you don't know the difference between the voice of God and the voice of the devil, and that is the hardest thing. At night, in the dark, when everything is hidden, it is entirely possible that the devil is mimicking. He is God's ape, of course. And it is entirely possible that it is God's voice. Something persuaded Abraham, whatever it was, and he went in faith. And as he went in faith, God answered and promised.

That's the most important thing: avoid getting drawn off into the speculative details, and hold fast to the promise. There was a ram. There was a ram caught in the thicket. I once said that to an incest victim, and she said, "Where was my ram?" Of course there are all kinds of people for whom the ram has not been provided, or for whom the ram has taken another form. So it is important not to explain, but to set out the promise bold as brass.

James 1: Lured and Enticed

Now the other texts after this are a little bit of a letdown, I'm afraid. We have Little Jim showing up here, who is actually much better than you might expect. He wants to absolve God of any implication in suffering. Luther follows James in his explanation of the petition

“Lead us not into temptation”: God indeed tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us or lead us into unbelief, despair, and other great and shameful sins. So Luther agrees with that. “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God.’”

But in fact Abraham appears to be under God’s temptation here. Certainly when Moses was attacked, and Zipporah had to circumcise her son and touch Moses’ feet with the foreskin, God was directly implicated in that one, and there are others too. Jesus prays desperately, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There is ambiguity about this. Sometimes both statements are true: God indeed tempts no one to sin, and yet God is the tempter. Those statements stand back to back, dialectically, and so we go.

But James is helpful at this point. Verse 14: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” Here is some sophisticated insight into the nature of temptation. We are caught and carried by our own desires. “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” Yes, yes, that’s how it goes. The desire starts small, it grows, it infests, it takes hold, and then it turns to deceit, one thing tumbling over another until we are caught. If you want this map drawn for you, the best thing to do is talk to an alcoholic. An alcoholic will tell you in minute detail how the temptation is carried.

Still, in dealing with these temptations we are dealing with moral temptations, and in dealing with moral temptations we are in a different position. The deeper temptations are the temptations to faith, in which, as with Abraham and with Jesus, faith itself is attacked.

Psalm 25: To You, O Lord, I Lift Up My Soul

Finally, let’s look at Psalm 25, and then we’ll go back to this interesting discussion Mark is posting and see what we can do. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.”

There are lots of psalms in which God is the adversary as well as the Redeemer. The difference in this one is that he is simply Redeemer. Psalm 77, I suppose, is the classic of the other kind, and on those grounds would fit better with Genesis 22. Nevertheless, the psalmist is wise, because temptation by its very nature draws us to rely on ourselves. That is the barb in the temptation that hooks us: the conviction that somehow we have to deliver ourselves. This psalmist knows something different. When we get hooked, we are caught up in a cycle of shame and guilt, shame and humiliation, in which we think we ought to be able to control it.

But we are in fact unable to control it, and because we are unable, shame and humiliation follow, and so we get into a vicious circle.

Now watch how this psalmist works. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.” He is laying it off. He already knows that he is not the solution to the problem, that he has to reach beyond himself, move outside himself, to the other: to you, O Lord. This is the end of temptation. God indeed tempts no one to sin; we pray in this petition that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us or lead us into unbelief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we are so tempted, we may finally prevail and gain the victory. The answer to temptation is not in ourselves but in God. “Let none who wait for you be put to shame; they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth.”

You see, God becomes the subject of the verb. God is the one working. Temptation meets its end there. It is not an end in which there is no more temptation; faith and unbelief contend against one another, and as they contend, faith gets its exercise, and like a muscle being worked, it continues to grow. So while Psalm 25 may be a little superficial compared with some of the other psalms, it is nevertheless very helpful. The source of strength in temptation is the other. As Luther said, this is what makes our theology certain: it takes us outside ourselves and brings us to rest in Christ Jesus. That’s how temptation ends as well.

Questions and Answers

A question about the petition “Lead us not into temptation,” in the sense of “do not allow us to be led.”

I think there’s a very nice ambiguity here. “Lead us not”: it leaves open the question of who the tempter is. We are asking God not to take us into temptation, and that, as I said concerning Psalm 25, is our strength. We don’t explain it. There are some who want God to be the source of all temptation, and some who are horrified at the thought. We leave it in a dialectic. We’re not sure, but we know this: even if we are so tempted, God will protect us in the midst of the temptation. Or, as Paul says, we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God.

A question whether it would then be blasphemous to call God the tempter.

According to James it would be, but according to Genesis, maybe not. That's the dialectic. According to James, to accuse God of being the tempter is fundamentally blasphemous. That's right. But other passages, the psalms for example, are pretty aggressive: "Why do you hide yourself, O Lord? Why do you tarry? What's going on with you? Get moving!" Or in Psalm 77 the question becomes whether God is impotent, whether he has lost his capacity to save. So sometimes Scripture itself is somewhat blasphemous about this, and in dealing with people pastorally you can't rule out blasphemy, because of course they have been hurt and wounded deeply. The blasphemy is matched on the one side by the confession of faith on the other. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The words of Psalm 22 in Jesus' mouth are a cry of abandonment and despair even as they are a cry of faith: my God, my God. Both stand together. So I don't think that issue can be resolved. In the end God will answer, as he has answered.

My old friend Sheldon Tostengard and I used to joke that we were going to found a congregation called Adversarial Redeemer Lutheran Church. We thought that would be a lot of fun. Sometimes in Scripture God appears to be our adversary, and it is precisely when he has become our adversary that we know him as our Redeemer. So there are both sides, and in the cry of dereliction from the cross both dimensions are together. We have to have James tell us that God indeed tempts no one to sin, just as Luther echoes this passage. We also have to have the psalmist say to the good Lord, "You're going to have to do a little better." That's the old Lutheran stuff. You recognize it.

A question about the church in Ethiopia and its history.

The church in Ethiopia was originally connected to the Coptic Church, until 1951. It started with Athanasius against the world, if you can imagine. Two brothers went down to Ethiopia as missionaries, to the very northern part of Ethiopia, near the town of Aksum, which is the religious center of old Ethiopia. One of those brothers went back up to Syria; the other went to see Athanasius, and Athanasius appointed him the head of the church in Ethiopia. From that point in the fourth century until 1951, the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was always from the Coptic Church. Now that connection has been broken, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has its independence. The present patriarch has a PhD from Princeton, and he's a very interesting man.

There are thirty-nine references to Ethiopia in Scripture. One of them, of course, is the story Mark refers to, of the Ethiopian eunuch who was baptized by Philip. I always love that text:

“What prevents me from being baptized?” That’s such a great question. So Ethiopia has a very close historical connection with Israel. In fact, Amharic, the language of Ethiopia, is closely related to Hebrew. If you look at the map, you can see it right there across the Red Sea. That was the old trade route: people from Israel would come down and Ethiopians would go up, and so there is a long history between them. So there’s a little lesson for you.

The Ethiopian Orthodox carry on a tradition of chanting that goes back to the Old Testament: the priests welcome the day and chant at the close of day. Like the Muslims, the Ethiopian Orthodox have speakers mounted on their churches, and they chant in the morning and in the evening. Whereas the Muslim call to prayer is brief, the Orthodox go on for hours at a time. Part of our ritual was listening to the chants in the morning and evening. We didn’t know what they were saying, but we recognized the melodies. Beautiful, just gorgeous.

And those Anuak people I was talking about: we went to that congregation twice, and I preached for them once. They are one of the tribes that has preserved the drums, so the drums were part of the worship, and by the time those drums got going, the whole congregation was dancing. It was really great. There I was, a properly reserved Minnesota Norwegian, standing there kind of tapping my foot, rhythmically impaired, and here comes an old man about eighty years old, bald and gray, sliding by me, just swinging his heart out in a song of praise to Jesus. A lot of fun. It was a wonderful trip, and I’ll tell you more stories about it later.

God’s peace to each one of you, and God keep you as you prepare to preach on Sunday. I’m so drawn to that Genesis text that I could hardly resist preaching on it, but you had better make sure you get the temptation in there too. It’s nice to see you; I’m glad to be back.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhzOoreFz0M>

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