

## MARK 1 : 12 – 15

*First Sunday in Lent, February 17-19, 2024*

*Smith*

### The First Sermon of the Savior

<sup>12</sup> **Right away the Spirit sent him out into the desert, <sup>13</sup> and he was in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.**

<sup>14</sup> **After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, preaching the good news of God.**

<sup>15</sup> **He said, "The time has come and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"**

It was the Holy Spirit at work, driving Jesus out of the populated places, away from the towns and villages, and into the wilderness. In Israel the wilderness is almost always desert, and while it isn't important for us to identify which desert, consider the one around the north end of the Dead Sea, where the scrolls were discovered: unforgiving stone, barren sand, spiders, scorpions, and vultures for company, and a few jackals and wild dogs in packs.

Jesus was in such a wilderness for forty days, and fasting for those forty days, both day and night. Fasting is something certain people try in our culture to lose weight in order to look good. That's not why Jesus or anyone fasted in ancient times. Fasting was meant to bring the flesh into subjugation of the mind and spirit, to deprive the body of all impulses and urges, only beginning with the desire for food. This kind of fasting was true solitude apart from every comfort, apart from friendship or companionship or even safety. The flesh of Jesus was being baked by day and nearly frozen by night.

Moses and Elijah had also fasted forty days and nights,<sup>1</sup> helped by the Holy Spirit and sustained by the Spirit. Jesus was driven to it. The significance of the forty days is a common symbol of purification before an important event, such as the forty days and nights Moses spent on the mountain with God before being given the Ten Commandments, the forty days and nights Elijah spent traveling to Mount Horeb before being given a sight, a glimpse, of God. Jesus would also spend forty days after his resurrection before he ascended into heaven. And here Jesus was about to begin his earthly ministry.

In a smaller way, we spend these forty days we call Lent pondering and considering the Passion of our Lord, leading of course to his death on the cross and resurrection three days later.

Jesus begins his ministry here in the wilderness where Adam left off. Here we have a man alone, surrounded by the basic items of creation without any of mankind's innovations or comforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8

There is only the man, the wild animals, the devil to tempt him, and afterward the angels to comfort him.

The devil tempted Jesus with every possible temptation. The devil wants to use even the Scriptures-- or to misuse them-- to wrestle man into an abuse of God's will. A shortcut! A quick way! If Jesus would use his powers as God's divine prince, he could with a mere word house the homeless, feed the hungry, give wealth to the poor, a harem to the lonely, power to the powerless!

But the devil fails here. Jesus preached the gospel *with his actions*: Christ is no prince; he is King. He did not come to do all of the works man should do so that man has nothing at all to do. The work of every man, woman and child of every generation is to use and improve the world; this was the command God gave to Adam and which we are still capable of doing, even in our fallen sinful state: **"Fill the earth,"** God said, **"and subdue it. Rule over the fish and birds and the creatures."** Gen 1:28

It was the other work that Jesus came to do, the work of atoning for sin, that the devil wanted to steer him away from. Satan so easily distracts us from this work of Christ, the saving work of Christ, that we are tempted to see Jesus as a role model and a teacher and not as the sacrifice of blood on the altar.

Jesus preached the gospel also *with his thoughts*. Not once in all of the temptations did Jesus say, "Here's what I think. This is what I assume." His thoughts were always and only on the Word of God, the text and the language of the Scriptures. In the Gospel accounts where some of the temptations are recorded with the Lord's responses, he stoops down and write the words of Moses in the dust or the sand at his feet: **"Man lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God,"** and **"do not put the Lord your God to the test,"** and **"Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."** Dt 8:3; 6:16; 6:13

Couldn't Jesus have composed a brand-new Book of the Bible here? A tirade against the tyrant Satan? Everything he says is the Word of God, he could have proclaimed long paragraphs of new and correct theology against the Devil here. But instead, he used what we all already have, the inspired text of the Bible, which is enough for any of us and for all of us to know just what God wants us to know for eternal life, for godly living, and for fighting the temptations of the devil.

The difference between being tempted and being tested is that the devil tempts us to try to get us to fall away, as he has, to ruin us and to kill faith in us. God, on the other hand, tests us to strengthen us, to give us a pop quiz to show what we've learned, to demonstrate our faith, and to encourage the people around us with the way we stand up to such a test.

After the temptation was over, Jesus learned that John the Baptist had been arrested and put into prison. He began to preach the gospel, this time *with his words*. He guided people to know who the true God is, what he has done for us, and how it is that we can get to heaven. John's Gospel makes it clear that this was not the very first sermon of Jesus chronologically, but it is first in importance, beginning with **"The time has come."**

This means the time for all of Jesus' preaching and teaching, and of his suffering and death, too. All of the long centuries since the promise in the Garden of Eden, the promise to Abraham, the promise to David, the last promise four hundred years before this to Malachi and just months ago in the preaching of John-- now all the long waiting was over. The people should not expect that everything the Savior said would be exactly what they wanted to hear. He came to command us to turn away from sin, not glory in our achievements.

**"The kingdom of God is near."** The Kingdom of God is the way God gathers people into his flock. A lot of Jesus' parables are about this: It's like a man sowing seed, a farmer being careful not to rip out the weeds, a small seed that grows, a naughty son who turns and goes home again, a wondering sheep found by the shepherd, and many others.

What are we to do? **"Repent and believe,"** Jesus commands. To repent is to stop sinning because we're afraid of the consequences; afraid of going to hell. I hold up my life and compare it to God's Ten Commandments, and I see where I've failed. In fact, the more closely I study the Law, the more failure I see in my life, until I see myself as a wretched creature who cannot approach God on my own. But then, Jesus holds out his hand: **"Believe the good news."**

There is no better news than knowing that my wretched sinfulness is covered by the blood of Jesus. But faith is not just knowing this good news. Faith is not even knowing that the good news of forgiveness is true. Faith means trusting in Jesus, relying on him to carry us into heaven purely by his grace.

Faith is trusting that God has only good things in store for us. He will test us sometimes to strengthen us and to strengthen others. He will bless us with just what we need, just the right thing at the right time. And if the angels came to serve the Son of God when he was tempted, how much more doesn't God know that we need their service and protection, too, and he sends them to watch over us and to fight behind the scenes as long as we live.

This is the bottom of the box of faith: that we fly right to God at all times, in good times as well as bad times, so that we will always be in the habit of running to his arms no matter what. He gathers his kingdom by calling us this way, and by showing us that he will supply absolutely everything we need, always.