

The First Temptation of Christ  
Mark 1:9-15  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
February 22, 2015 (March 1, 2015)

This is the second Sunday of Lent, which started with Ash Wednesday a couple weeks ago. Every year, the catholic father of a friend of mine would tell me that he was giving up carrots for Lent...and that he hates carrots.

Our selection from Mark is credited as the source of the tradition of Lent, in it's most basic forms. There isn't that much there, though. Only two verses. Verse 14, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. Verse 15, it was 40 days, Satan tempted him, he was with the wild animals, and angels waited on him. The same accounts in Matthew & Luke offers us a lot more details of everything that happened than Mark.

Jesus had just been Baptized and his public ministry was about to begin. But first he had to make himself spiritually ready for it. So the Spirit drove him into the Wilderness. There is a desert in Israel east of Jerusalem on the West Bank descending toward the Dead Sea called the Judaeen Desert, but was also known in Hebrew as Yeshimon or “the Wilderness.” So, this is probably where Jesus was driven to prepare himself.

He probably did not have much in the way of supplies with him, both because he went immediately, and also because depriving oneself of sustenance among other things is a common way that ascetics worldwide engage in spiritual activities. Worldly things are seen as a distraction from obtaining inner peace or other spiritual goals, so by abstaining from them, you are no longer distracted by them. During the time of Jesus, who was considered by some to be a Nazirite, along with John the Baptist, and there were a number of other ascetics, like the Ebionites, and also the Essenes, from whom we have the Dead Sea Scrolls. And many early Christians became ascetics and Hermits in deserts in imitation of Christ, based in large part to this account of Jesus preparing himself spiritually in the desert. However, as time went on, on the Jewish side, asceticism was viewed as an anathema to God's wishes for people to enjoy the world; and on the Christian side, many of the ascetic practices were viewed as unhealthy and replaced

with alternatives.

Then Mark gives us a timeframe. Forty days Jesus was fasting in the desert. I learned two interesting things about that. First, that fasting back then meant that a person ate only one meal a day. Fasting traditionally foreshadows a great spiritual struggle. Moses and Elijah did the same as Jesus here, and Mark connects the three together at the Transfiguration, selection two weeks ago. Second, in the Bible, and in the other cultures from the Middle East, forty is used to represent a large approximate number, nothing exact, and in Christianity specifically to designate important time periods. It doesn't really matter how long Jesus was in the desert, He was there because it was important to prepare, and he took as long as He needed to.

Next, Jesus is tempted by Satan. Again, barely any detail is given. How was he tempted? Tempted with what? Given the way Mark is, and how the Gospel is laid out, I would assume that Satan was tempting Jesus to give up his ministry before it even begins. Jesus has prepared himself spiritually, and was ready for this struggle, so we have to assume by reading between the lines. Matthew and Luke gives more details, depicting the whole interaction with Satan. Satan tempted Jesus to break his fast by suggesting that he turn stones into bread, then to publicly perform a Messianic miracle by throwing himself off the roof of the Temple and forcing God's angels to catch him, then by offering Jesus dominion over the whole of Creation if he worships him. Each time, Jesus rebukes Satan.

Next is the one part of Mark's account that is not in Matthew or Luke. Jesus was with the wild animals. Scholars think that this was meant to describe how alone and low Jesus was mentally, especially in contrast to a few verses earlier where Jesus is baptized, is among friends and God, and then is alone in a desert being tested by God's Adversary for a long time. After he passes the spiritual test, we can see how Jesus has physically suffered, as God has sent angels to see to Jesus and make him well enough to continue.

The traditions of Lent are connected to this episode of Jesus' life, the Temptation of Christ. Back before Christianity became the state religion of Rome, new Christian converts were baptized only on Easter morning,

following six weeks of instructions during Lent, and fasting from Good Friday to Easter. After becoming the state religion, Christianity was inundated with new converts the fasting and practices of self-renunciation were then required annually of all Christians, to show solidarity with those going through the conversion process, and also for their own spiritual benefit.

Traditions of Lent have changed over time. There was fasting, refraining from celebrations, and performing acts of penance. Then there was vigorous prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In modern times, the common practices among most of Christian churches are: Giving something up that is a vice; Performing an act regularly that brings you closer to God; and Giving money or time to charitable causes. Other churches have additional traditions, like high churches covering crucifixes and other religious images with purple fabrics; or the addition or exclusion of certain parts of worship; some prohibit eating certain meats; and some practice some kind of pre-Lent feast, like Mardi Gras, Carnival, and Fat Tuesday.

And each church has their own local traditions. The church I grew up in had a tradition of Lenten breakfast in the morning before worship on the first Sunday. It was not uncommon to see choir members rushing off to rehearsal still munching on toast. The church I served in Worcester would make a daily devotional prayer book every year filled with prayers written by the church's members. The church I attended in New Haven handed out bookmarks with a daily prayer on one side, and a do-it-yourself prayer outline on the back.

I remember one Lent I gave up video games. I was in my first year at divinity school, my schedule was very different than my friends', so I would play on the playstation between classes or during any free time. That Lent, I listened to a sermon a friend gave, where she challenged us to reflect on our lives and give something up for Lent that we would feel the loss of. So, I reflected not on what I could give up, but what I should give up. Was there something that was having a negative impact in some way in my life? Something that could be considered viceful? I realized it was the video games. Playing them was consuming my time that would have been better used doing anything else, they were keeping me inside, and they were

keeping me from socializing with others. So I stopped playing and would use the time to study more or go volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. When Lent was over, I found that I was no longer really that interested in starting to play again. I still do, but never again to the same extent, and mostly now I only play them as a social activity with friends.

Choosing to observe Lent is a personal decision, and how one does so is relative to your own life. If you do choose to do so, you can ask yourself: Is there something you should give up? Would you feel the loss of such a thing? What can you do once you are free from indulging? Maybe donate the money or time saved to some charitable cause? And lastly, is there some spiritual practice that you would like to try? While this is the second Sunday of Lent, it is not too late to start something. The choice is yours.

Amen

## Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

God of all Creation, Maker of the wilderness and water, your Son was baptized and tempted as we are. We ask your Guidance through this season, that we may not avoid struggle, but open ourselves to blessing, through the cleansing depths of repentance and the heaven-rending words of the Spirit.

And in this season of repentance and healing, we accept God's invitation to be ever-mindful of the needs of others, offering our prayers on behalf of God's community in the church and the world. We pray for those who are not well, that they may be healed, and we pray for their care-givers. We pray for the lonely, and that we can provide them with comfort. We offer prayers of thanksgiving for the blessings in our lives. We especially pray for...

O God, Fill us with your strength to resist the seductions of our foolish desires and the tempter's vain delights, that we may walk in obedience and righteousness, rejoicing in you with an upright heart. Amen.