Mark 1:9-15

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.10And 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.11And 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.13He was in the wilderness for 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 \*15and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;\* repent, and believe in the good news.’\*

Lent: Christian Boot Camp

How many of you are experiencing déjà vu right now? You’re saying, “Haven’t we just gone over the very same scripture readings, or something much like it, a couple months ago?” You’re right. Part of this passage was preached on in the beginning of January (Baptism of the Lord) and part of it toward the end of January (the beginning of Jesus’ ministry). “So why,” you may ask, “are we going over these passages once again in such a short period of time? I mean, the Bible is a big book, right? Couldn’t you find something *different* to preach on?”

Today we get those two parts, Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his proclamation, woven together by the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Lent lasts for forty days, the same number of days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. It serves as a kind of Christian boot camp, where we train to withstand temptations. But are we called into the wilderness in the same way Jesus was called? And do we have what it takes to get us through the wilderness? And boot camp is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end; it’s training for something far more critical, far more dangerous that comes immediately after camp. What are you and I training for? How is our mission similar to that of Jesus? This morning I’d like to look at these three phases of Jesus’ life, his calling, his temptation, and his mission in order for us to see a parallel process in our lives. By doing so, I hope you will see how Lent is not repeated process any more than Jesus’ temptation was a repeated process. If you are at that point in your Christian walk that you are entering the wilderness, I pray that you will find encouragement in today’s message. And if you have come out of the wilderness, I pray that you would gain greater confidence and clarity in the specific mission that God has called you into.

1. Calling

The season of Lent has become, unfortunately, a time of penance when we get all somber and we give up a bad habit or two until Easter when we can go back to life at is was. It’s a cycle we go through. We find ourselves capable of overcoming certain temptations, or giving up some indulgence like coffee or ice cream for the short term but not forever. I can give up eating chocolate for 40 days (by the way; good news for you who are giving something up for Lent. Sundays don’t count as being part of Lent. They are *in* Lent but not *of* Lent, so you can technically break your fasts on Sundays), but once Easter comes, I’m back to eating it. I can stay awake during the worship service for six weeks straight, but after Easter you may hear me snoring. I may give generously to everyone who begs for a couple months, but after Easter my pocketbook is closed for business. It would be better if we could make those changes that we make during Lent *permanent* changes. Observing Lent as a temporary time of changed behavior is like a soldier who has just gone to boot camp and lost 30 pounds and built muscle tone and who has been running five miles a day, coming home and spending the next ten months watching TV and eating Twinkies. All of the gains that were made during training have been lost.

The point of Lent when it began back in the second or third century was to prepare new Christians for baptism. It was a one-time thing – in other words, Lent *was* boot camp, a time of fasting and training so that the way you lived during Lent was the way you lived every day of your life. Jesus didn’t come out of the wilderness saying, “Boy, I’m glad that’s over. Where’s the nearest Wendy’s?” Lent was just the beginning of something much more intense, like boot camp is only a time to prepare for real combat.

We need some inspiration, some encouragement. The reason we treat Lent as a repeating cycle of abstinence followed by a return to the “normal” is that we have become too complacent with the normal. We often make the claim, “I’m only human” to explain away our sins. It’s our line of defense when we break our promises to ourselves. “It was more than I could handle. I’m only human.” This actually betrays our lack of confidence. We tell ourselves that we can’t get to a higher level. And today’s scripture readings should provide us with some inspiration to move forward instead of spinning our wheels. In today’s reading from Genesis, God makes a promise to Noah that he will never flood the earth again. The reason he did it in the first place was because humanity had become so evil, so corrupted that it grieved God. The proliferation of sin caused God to suffer, and he thought it better to start over with one man and his family. But after the flood, did things get any better? Did humanity stop destroying itself and the earth? No. We didn’t change, but God *did* He promised that he would never again put us through something as horrendous as the flood, and it was a unilateral promise; he didn’t give us anything to do in return. In other words, God says, “You are okay with me, as you are. I know you’re only human, I know you sin, but I will preserve and protect and bless you just the same. Isn’t that great news? So many people feel that they owe God something, but God is saying, I love you and I will bless you even as you are. Jesus hears such encouraging words at his baptism: “You are my son, my beloved; my favor rests upon you.” Studies show that children who are regularly encouraged by their parents achieve much more in life. As Christians we must hear God’s encouragement: “You are my beloved on whom my favor rests.”

Henri Nouwen, a famous priest, describes the impact that God’s love and favor can have upon people in his book *The Life of the Beloved*:

There is one of my friends there who is quite handicapped but a wonderful, wonderful lady. She said to me, "Henri, can you bless me?" I remember walking up to her and giving her a little cross on her forehead. She said, "Henri, it doesn't work. No, that is not what I mean." I was embarrassed and said, "I gave you a blessing." She said, "No, I want to be blessed." I kept thinking, "What does she mean?"

We had a little service and all these people were sitting there. After the service I said, "Janet wants a blessing." I had an alb on and a long robe with long sleeves. Janet walked up to me and said, "I want to be blessed." She put her head against my chest and I spontaneously put my arms around her, held her, and looked right into her eyes and said, "Blessed are you, Janet. You know how much we love you. You know how important you are. You know what a good woman you are."

She looked at me and said, "Yes, yes, yes, I know. I suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her. She seemed to be relieved from the feeling of depression because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed. She went back to her place and immediately other people said, "I want that kind of blessing, too."

The people kept walking up to me and I suddenly found myself embracing people. I remember that after that, one of the people in our community who assists the handicapped, a strong guy, a football player, said, "Henri, can I have a blessing, too?" I remember our standing there in front of each other and I said, "John," and I put my hand on his shoulder, "you are blessed. You are a good person. God loves you. We love you. You are important." [[1]](#footnote-1)

It is essential that we know this, that we are loved and looked upon with favor by the God of the universe, before we can truly be a blessing to others. God makes this so clear to Jesus as he is baptized. God says it so Jesus can hear it: “You are my beloved son; in you my favor rests.”

1. The Wilderness

No sooner do these words come out of God’s mouth than God pushes Jesus into the wilderness – the Greek word for “drove” may be translated, “cast out with force.” It sounds like God is being rash, but there’s a war out there, and we are not called to settle for imperfection. We’re not called to put up with evil around us any more than we are called to tolerate evil *within* us. By sending, nay *pushing* Jesus into the wilderness immediately after his baptism, those comforting words remain fresh in his mind and in his heart. Before a young man or woman heads off to boot camp, what is the most important thing a mother or father or girlfriend or boyfriend or husband or wife can do to is to say to that person, “I love you,” and it’s best if that is the last thing you say before that person leaves; the fresher the memory of those encouraging words (“you are my beloved; in you I am well-pleased), the more equipped we are to face temptation. The power of those words can help you weather the worst storms; the peaceful assurance that God loves you and looks with favor upon you is what enables you to face all trials.

1. The Mission

Once Jesus returns from the wilderness his mission begins. He proclaims, “Repent and hear the good news: the Kingdom of God is at hand.” We can infer that Jesus gained a clarity about his own mission while he was in the wilderness. The time in the wilderness was not only a time to face demons; it was a time to consult the Father in order to know what the next step would be. Not all of us are called in same way Jesus was called, with his emphasis on proclamation and healing. Our focus may be elsewhere, in art, in teaching, in music, in construction, in cooking, in farming. If all of us were called to be itinerant preachers, the human race would soon vanish from the face of the earth. The wilderness time is a time of discernment as well as self-discipline. It’s a time to ask God, “What would you have me do? Where would you have me to go?” I would not be a terribly effective evangelist in South Korea because I have not mastered the language, but I may be of some use to God washing dishes in the kitchen, or mopping the floors, or teaching English. But the main point is that you recognize that you have a place in God’s grand scheme. He has a position that you are specifically qualified to fill; there is no unemployment in the Kingdom of God.

Lent was never supposed to be a temporary time of abstinence or penance or heightened spirituality. It was a time for those who were preparing to make their confession of faith to prepare for the life that was and should be expected of all Christians. And every newcomer to the faith needs to know first and foremost that he/she is beloved of God, that God looks favorably upon that person. Then that person should spend time in prayer, learning to trust in God to help him overcome temptations, in the scripture, learning about what God expects of us, and learning to listen for God’s unique calling for his life. So today’s takeaway is that this Lent you make permanent change. If you’ve already given up something for Lent, give it up permanently. This will no doubt lead you to a more fervent prayer life as you seek God’s help in making this change. If you already are a committed Christian who is on the front line, pray that God would show you what you can do to advance his kingdom.

1. Excerpt from *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen, found online at <http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen_3502.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)