

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

<sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

### **Dealing with Our Demons**

We started our *Born Anew* worship series on Ash Wednesday, and our theme was *realization*; Ash Wednesday is a day we focus on our mortality, the realization that we are not eternal beings apart from God – the statement that accompanies the administration of ashes, “from dust you came, and to dust you will return,” is what God says to the man and the woman after they transgress, eating the fruit that he had told them not to eat. We lost something big when we disobeyed God’s commandment. But there is an upside to Ash Wednesday as well; we recognize what we gain through Jesus Christ. In Christ we are indeed *born anew*. And our life is not only restored but also purified. Jesus saved us from death AND sin. And so the pastor also tells you to “remember your baptism” as he or she administers those ashes.

Today we move on to the story of Jesus in the wilderness, and our theme is *preparation*. The whole season of Lent reflects those forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, and the whole season of Lent may be seen as a time of *preparing* ourselves to take on the Christian lifestyle. For over 1500 years the season of Lent has been a kind of boot camp for new believers and a re-training for those who had already joined the Church. Because let’s face it; none of us are perfect in our Christian walk, so we need some time in the wilderness to focus in on our imperfections. It’s unfortunate that for some people Lent is all about “giving up” something or “taking on” something superficial; giving up alcohol or sweets, taking on yoga or regular exercise can certainly be good for your body, but if you have a sickness in your spirit those same disciplines may do nothing for you. They can even cause spiritual damage if they become sources of pride that cause you to think of yourself more highly than others. Lent is about *spiritual* transformation, so we need to ask ourselves, “What are those things that keep me from walking the walk with Jesus, from living the life that God intends me to live?” Or, as I suggest by the title of this sermon, “*What are the demons that I am dealing with?*”

Some people may think it rather unscientific that I use the term “demon” when speaking about the evil in our hearts, but evil in itself is a very hard thing to explain scientifically. On the other hand we know evil when we see it, and if it helps us to personify it in the form of little monsters, why not? The important thing is that we know how to minister to ourselves to “cast out” our

demons, and today I suggest that focusing in on our sins, and analyzing them, and praying fervently for deliverance from those sins is a good approach. So let's talk about those demons.

Most of you I'm sure are familiar with the other two stories of Jesus in the wilderness, those found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, where Satan tempts Jesus in three specific ways that pretty much generalize every type of temptation that exists – the temptation to seek wealth, the temptation to claim what belongs to God, and the temptation to use the power that God gives us for personal gain. But let's face it; most of us don't run into Satan in the same way Jesus does in Matthew and Luke (that may be a good thing, because if all the riches of the world were offered to us we might just be tempted to receive them). But the Gospel of Mark doesn't give any details of Jesus' encounter with Satan, and so we are free to imagine what happened between them. And more importantly we are free to examine more specific and more personal ways that Satan tempts us individually.

For example, with the children today I focused on the temptation to attack people with words, to put other people down by calling them this or that. While you may not call someone "poopy pants" or "bugger breath" you may be hurtful simply in the tone of your voice or the expression on your face. This is the time for you to pray about that, to ask God, "God, do I offend others by the way I act or speak? And if so, why do I do that?" Because behavior can be a hard thing to change if we don't look at the underlying *cause* of that behavior; there are lots of people addicted to alcohol and drugs who can't shake their addiction because there is some deeper psychological / spiritual reason why they feel the need for drink or drugs. Likewise your offensive words or actions may not be something you can simply give up unless you take some time to figure out why you say such mean things or act in such offensive ways to begin with. Lent is the perfect time to pray about the root causes of our sin.

Maybe you're dealing with a different demon; maybe you're dealing with the demon of self-deprecation, of feeling that you are ungifted or stupid. That demon is making you feel lousy about yourself and preventing you from doing something that might bring you great joy and a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem. This is the time for you to ask God, "God, am I putting myself down? What's making me feel so worthless or ashamed?" Maybe you've been attacked by those who are dealing with the demon I just mentioned, the demon that causes us to put people down. God wants to empower you to live a full life where your gifts are apparent to all, including yourself, so that you can live joyfully, celebrating who you are and who others are.

Maybe you're dealing with the demon of blame; someone has hurt you in the past and you cannot forgive that person. I'm really concerned about people who say to me, "Pastor, I cannot forgive this person for what he did to me," because I myself have refused to forgive someone for a long time, and I see the damage that it does to me when I refuse to forgive. I get stuck feeling the victim, and so I never really grow up. Refusing to forgive chains you down and prevents you from experiencing full joy and from realizing your own full potential; you're stuck with this image of the person who has hurt you, and just as you can't change your perception of that person you yourself can't change either. This is the time for you to ask God, "God, what is keeping me from forgiving this person? Why do I insist on hating this person? How can I become free from this bondage to hatred?"

There are so many other demons that stifle us, that keep us from experiencing the full freedom and full joy that comes when we enter new life in Jesus Christ. Imagine what might happen if you spent forty days prayerfully reflecting upon your “issues,” forty days dealing with the demons that so enslave you. Notice what Jesus does after his forty days in the wilderness; he went about proclaiming that “the kingdom of heaven has come near; repent and believe the good news!” Forty days in the wilderness led Jesus to the realization that God’s kingdom had indeed come, that people needed to turn their lives around, and that all this was very good news! We look at the state of the world and ask ourselves, “*Where* is the Kingdom of God?” We have failing health and failing marriages and failing finances and we say, “This can’t possibly be the Kingdom of God.” But when we look into *ourselves* and identify the demons and take the time to expel those demons, to say as Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan!” then we can say, as Jesus said, “The kingdom of God has come near...to ME!” There is one time, in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus says to someone, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” That was a scribe who affirmed what Jesus had said were the two greatest commandments – love God with all your heart, mind, strength, and spirit, and love neighbor as self. The scribe said, “You’re right; to love God and love neighbor is more important than burnt offerings.” It’s more important than giving up beer or sweets. It’s more important than regular exercise and a good diet. The kingdom of God is about inward change that can lead us to love God and love others better than we’re doing now.

I don’t think I’m shocking anyone when I tell you, “You can’t fix the world’s problems.” At least not all of them. But you *can* change the problems that exist in *you*, by the grace of God. If you spend forty days prayerfully examining your own “issues” instead of just offering God some superficial sacrifice (I’m going to stop eating potato chips), instead of hardening your heart and insisting that all the problems are outside yourself, you can look at the demons that are preventing you from living the good life and you can be a changed person. You can be born anew, or born anew again. The world’s problems will still be there; your spouse might still leave you, your finances might still be shaky, your physical health might still be an issue, and ISIS might still be causing terror in cities around the world, but *you will be different, and you will be equipped to make positive change in your own sphere of influence*. Most importantly you will experience the full joy of kingdom life, having been freed from the demons that bind you. May God encourage you to deal with your demons throughout this season of Lent and you may experience life in a whole new way. Amen.