

All You Have to Do
A Sermon on Mark 1-9-15
First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

Introduction

One of the haunting questions that Diana Butler Bass asks in *Grounded* is Where is God? She asks that question in every chapter.

People are asking that question today because they no longer believe in the image of a God who sits on a throne in heaven and rewards the faithful by granting them eternal life to live at his feet in heaven.

The Gospel of Mark asks the same question. In today's story, Jesus goes into the wilderness to find God.

First Move: Liberation from Cosmic Powers

God had become detached in Mark's day. God seemed to have lost interest in Israel. God delivered the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the mightiest empire of its day, but Judea later became part of the Babylonian Empire, then part of the Persian Empire, then the Greek empire, then Rome. And Israel was a rather unimportant part of all these empires for several hundred years. How could one possibly believe that Israel was still the chosen people of a universal God? Is God still all-powerful? Does God still care about Israel? These questions gave rise to apocalyptic eschatology: it would require a Big Bang to change everything, to redeem Israel's belief in God's special concern for its fate

God also had become distant. Israel in the earliest Biblical days understood that God was their god and other nations had their own gods. Later in the Biblical period, the people of Israel came to believe that God had become the god of all the nations. The belief that God was omnipresent, that God could be in all places at all times, came into Judaism from Greek philosophy; it was still several centuries away. That created a theological problem: if there is only one God, how can he be everywhere and do everything at the same time? One answer: he delegates responsibility to others. Angels and spirits carry out his orders. God communicates with people on earth through angels and the spirit.

Evil is caused by Satan and his army of fallen angels. The figure of Satan begins to emerge in Persian times, around 500 years before Christ. Good and evil

both come from heaven, but from different divine beings. People believed that the earth was subject to cosmic forces of good and evil. Humans were helpless to resist demonic forces through their own efforts.

Jesus also seems to be subject to the cosmic powers at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. At his baptism the spirit descends into him like a dove. Immediately after Jesus is baptized, the spirit drives him into the wilderness. The Greek uses a strong verb, ἐκβάλλω. It is the same verb that Mark uses to describe Jesus as casting out demons. The spirit casts Jesus out into the wilderness.

We should not confuse Mark's testing with the temptation stories in Matthew and Luke. Mark's testing is only two verses. Here is how I translate it:

¹² And straight away the spirit casts him out into the wilderness.

¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by Satan, and he was in the midst of wild animals, and the angels were deaconing him.

Notice what is *not* here. Mark's version is less colorful. There is no mention of Jesus' fasting. There are not three different temptations by Satan. There is no dialogue between Jesus and Satan.

Notice what *is* here. Jesus is in the midst of wild animals in Mark. There are no wild animals in Matthew and Luke. The angels are deaconing Jesus in Mark. The Greek word διακονέω means to wait on someone, like a table servant, serving food and drink. The angels apparently are deaconing Jesus the whole 40 days. There are no angels in Matthew and Luke.

Notice also that Satan is testing Jesus rather than tempting Jesus, but the text does not say how it turns out. Mark may be deliberately leaving the story open-ended. There is no once and for all vanquishing of Satan. There will be more struggles with Satan in the future.

The emphasis in Mark is on wilderness. The Hebrew word for wilderness is *midbar*. It can mean that which is desolate and deserted and that which is beyond: beyond settled farming communities, beyond the reach of government. Wilderness is untamed by the culture. The Spirit is driving Jesus away from the culture.

The wilderness in the Old Testament is also a place where God provides for his people. The Hebrew slaves learn to become dependent upon God by wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. The prophet Elijah hides out in the wilderness for 40 days to escape King Ahab, whose army is searching for him to kill him. Angels bring food to Elijah while he is in the wilderness.

The spirit casts Jesus out into the wilderness, but God does not do the testing. Jesus is tested by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days. The testing is a battle of strength. Jesus almost seems to be a passive actor. The angels are deaconing him the whole time, giving him the strength to resist Satan.

Mark's understanding of spirituality has a dark edge to it. You have to die to your selfish desires to find God. The discovery of presence and providence grows out of testing. Testing is part of divine vocation. God calls us to let our old identities dissolve.

Part of Jesus' mission in the Gospel of Mark is to clear the earth of demons. Jesus brings salvation, which is a liberation of humanity from the cosmic powers that oppress it.

Second Move: The Gospel in Miniature

After Jesus has been tested, he is ready to occupy a new role. Jesus returns from the wilderness and is thrust back into society.

Jesus lays out the gospel in miniature in two verses: "The time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and trust in the good news."

The old age of Satan's dominion has been fulfilled. The good news is that God is near, a new age is about to begin. God always has ruled and already rules, but now God is about to reassert his claim on the world.

The kingdom of God is how the King James Bible translates the Greek phrase, ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. A more literal translation is the rule of God. The emphasis is on the act of ruling rather than territory.

It is a time of salvation and judgment. The world is in crisis because people and nations do not acknowledge the rule of God. They act as if God doesn't exist.

Jesus calls on people to do two things. Repent and trust. That is all you have to do. If only it were so easy.

To repent means to turn away from the old age and turn in faith toward the new age. Turn to the new reality that is dawning.

Repent has a secondary meaning of being sorry for your sins. Part of turning to God is recognizing your own sinfulness and the sin of your people. Our sin separates us from God. Jesus dispelled the demons. We no longer have evil spirits and demons to blame when we sin.

We are reminded every year in Advent and Lent to turn toward God because it is hard to do. The Lord comes as a little baby in Advent, but in Lent the Lord asks us confront our own sinfulness. We have to wrestle with turning toward God every day for the rest of our lives.

Acknowledgment of sin is a particular problem for progressive Christians. People with liberal theology are often accused of not taking the problem of sin seriously. We emphasize forgiveness and downplay judgment.

The kingdom of God can be either imposed from above or acknowledged from below. The apocalyptic view is that things are so bad that only God can set things right by imposing order from above. That is Mark's view. The historical Jesus may have been closer to the other end: the kingdom of God comes when we recognize that God rules our lives. That is the move that rabbinic Judaism later made—the kingdom refers to an internal recognition of what is not obvious to the eyes. There is no apocalyptic event; God's kingship is something that one must accept upon oneself. God's kingship is internalized.

That is hard to do. The desert fathers felt that they had to escape to the desert to die to their old self and turn toward God. After Rome adopted Christianity in the fourth century, they regarded society as a shipwreck from which each person had to swim for his life. They thought that people were drifting along, passively accepting the Roman imperial beliefs and values.

Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, spurred a revival of interest in the desert fathers by translating their writings into English in 1960. He writes that the desert fathers doubted that Christianity and politics could ever be mixed so as to produce a fully Christian society. The only Christian society for them was the mystical body of Christ.

They fled from the world because they believed it was divided into two types of men: those who were successful and imposed their will on others, and those who had to give in and be imposed upon. The desert fathers declined to be ruled by men and they had no desire to rule over others.

By going into the wilderness, the desert fathers had nothing to conform to except the inscrutable will of God. They wanted to be free to seek God, to find their own true self in Christ. Their goal was purity of heart, a clear vision of a reality that was anchored in God through Christ.

Third Move: Praying about Sin

Where is God today? That is so much noise today that it is hard to find God.

It helps if we can have our own wilderness experience. Can we spend the next 40 days in the wilderness? Find a quiet place to get away from the stimulation of the culture.

I can't believe I am suggesting this to an open and affirming congregation, but go in the closet.

The traditional reading for Ash Wednesday is Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21: “When you pray, go into your closet and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret.”

We can pray in a quiet place each day and acknowledge the sins that we have committed. These types of prayers are called prayers of confession.

We have a stronger sense of self and agency today. We no longer believe that we are pawns tossed about by cosmic forces with no power over our lives. We recognize that much of the evil in the world comes from human sin rather than Satan and demons. It is our own sin, not Satan, that separates us from God. We are tested not by Satan but by our own thoughts.

The desert fathers recognized eight wicked thoughts, which developed in Catholic orthodoxy into the seven cardinal sins.

John Cassian lived with the desert fathers in Egypt for a few years and wrote two books, *The Institutes* and *The Conferences*, that became the model for Western monasticism for the next 1,700 years. Cassian taught that Christians on a spiritual journey need to renounce three things, and one of them is our thoughts. Our thoughts are the noise that is going on in our minds. Cassian calls some thoughts wicked because they easily turn into selfish desires. They feed our ego, what Thomas Merton calls our false self, trying to get our attention.

Cassian’s eight wicked thoughts are gluttony, fornication or sex, covetousness, anger, dejection, acedia or listlessness, vainglory and pride. In the seven cardinal sins, acedia is changed to sloth and vainglory and pride are combined into pride.

Pray each day about one wicked thought. Think of the times that you indulged that wicked thought. There are 40 days in Lent. Pray about a wicked thought for five days in a row, then move to the next thought.

The first wicked thought is gluttony. Gluttony is the pattern of eating indiscriminately with no thought of how this food is feeding our spiritual life. Fast every day. Cassian thought of fasting as not eating between meals. Eat only at mealtime and eat only what is served. Eating too little or too much are indications that our thoughts are out of control. With fewer thoughts dominating our consciousness, we will eventually experience God’s interior communication with us.

The second wicked thought is fornication. Thoughts about sex have evolved over the centuries, so I will supplement Cassian’s thoughts with those of Mary Margaret Funk, a Benedictine nun. [No better place to look for advice on sex than from a monk and a nun.] She offers a modern perspective on sex in her book, *Thoughts Matter*, which we read on Wednesday nights about a year ago.

Sister Funk says that sexual urges are good when they are well-ordered, when we honor our partner and treat them with tenderness. Sexual urges become an

affliction when they degenerate into lust, treating another person as an object and using their body to gratify ourselves.

Celibacy is the ideal for all people. In celibacy we renounce the fulfillment of erotic urges. God alone satisfies our deepest desires.

There are three types of celibates: monastic, married and single. Any thoughts about sex were inappropriate for a monk. Any thoughts about sex outside of marriage were inappropriate for a married person. Any thoughts about sex outside of a committed, caring relationship are inappropriate for single people. Chastity is an option for people who don't have a partner.

Celibates don't repress sexual desires. They redirect these energies in ways that express love for God and for our partner.

We can curb our wicked thoughts about sex by avoiding environments that evoke the desire for inappropriate sex. Married people are looking for trouble when they go to pickup places without their spouse. Avoid relationships that are sexually tempting.

I will let you read or refer back to *Thoughts Matter* on your own for help with the other six wicked thoughts.

Conclusion

Jesus tells us that all you have to do is turn to God and trust in God. Those two things take a lifetime of spiritual discipline. The disciples in the Gospel of Mark are unable to do that. Mary calls them the Dunderhead Disciples. They consistently misunderstand Jesus. They cling to their old identities and abandon Jesus on the cross. The challenge for us is to follow the example of the desert fathers instead of the disciples.

We can take sin seriously. When we confess our sins about wicked thoughts, we try to remove the things that separate us from God. We make room for God to rule in our lives instead of being ruled by selfish desires.

So go in the closet and pray about food and sex.