

“The Next Steps”

It seems like we were just here a few short weeks ago. It was back in December, as we prepared for Christmas, that we heard the account by Mark of Jesus’ Baptism.

So why are we so soon repeating this part of the Gospel? It’s obviously (or maybe obviously isn’t the right word?) not the Baptism on which we focus today, but the immediate aftermath. Mark writes: ***“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”***

Now both Matthew and Luke provide us some details about what ***“tempted by Satan”*** entailed.

In the wake of the voice from heaven identifying Jesus as ***“the Beloved with whom [God] is well pleased,”*** Satan digs right in with ***“If you are the Son of God . . .”*** So the first level of attack comes at the issue of identity. ***“Who are you? Are you really who (or what) you claim to be?”*** If so, demonstrate this . . .

According to the other two Synoptic Gospel, Satan then goes after the issue of mission: ***“Go ahead, Jesus, gather a crowd through a splashy display! Jump off this temple tower a float to the ground and people will flock all around you. You won’t need that cross schtick!”*** Again and again, in Mark’s Gospel, we see Jesus dealing with this issue whenever He commands people to be quiet about this miracle or that episode, because Jesus knows that Satan can and will twist that away from Jesus’ true mission: to endure the cross.

Then the other Gospels tell us that the third temptation had to do with position, or status. ***“Bow to me and watch what I can do for you, Jesus”*** But Jesus is too secure in His identity and relationship with the Father to be seduced by so ephemeral an offer.

In all three of those temptations, we could see ourselves (which I rather expect was the reason the Holy Spirit, working through Matthew and Luke, had them recorded for us).

We, too, must constantly deal with the issue of identity. In part, because often we are not as secure in knowing that we are the Lord's as we ought to be. In part, because we get seduced into looking at things other than our relationship to Christ as the key to who we are: We look to career or job . . . that defines me. We look to family . . . that's who I am (or want to be). We look to what others think of us [which is why advertisers hit that button so forcefully: "*Drive a KIA, and a scantily-clad young woman will look with obvious desire in your direction and crowds will cheer you as if you were a rock star or athlete*" — (as if!!!)]

We, too, can be tempted to steer clear of what we know God has called us, in the waters of our Baptism, to do: "*Somebody else is much better at that than I am.*" "*I wouldn't know what to say or what to do.*" [By the way, you didn't know how to drive a car directly out of the womb, either — you learned to do that because it was important to you. See any correlation?] "*I don't 'feel' 'called,' so I must not be.*"

We also can be tempted to think that our status in Christ removes us from gaining what the world may have to offer us, and often desire to have what the world offers at the expense of our true status as children of God.

But in Mark's Gospel, none of those scenarios are played out. He simply informs us, "***He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan . . .***" So what should be our focus in Mark's account? To what should we pay special attention so that we get the point he is trying to bring to us? The underlying assumption is that Mark is not just telling a story to tell a story; he has a point to make. I think, at first, a key word is "***immediately***"

There is no question that Satan is not a happy camper whenever anyone is brought into the community of faith. Satan is quite happy to keep people locked up in the bondage of self-centeredness, self-indulgence,

self-promotion, and self-interest. Did you happen to catch the common theme just then? “Self!” Oh, how Satan loves that concept! If he can keep you focused within, his work is 97% done.

Luther consistently used this phrase to describe the sinful condition: *homo incurvatus* — “one curved inward on self” Father, Son and Holy Spirit — the Holy Trinity — gets replaced by the “ersatz trinity”: me, myself, and I.

You see it all around: People so self-absorbed they have no time for anyone else. People so caught up in what they are doing that they don’t realize that their texting means danger to everyone else on the road, or that their conversation in the middle of the store aisle is holding up everyone else who needs to move down that row to find a can of mushrooms; or that the stop sign doesn’t necessarily apply to them, if they’re in a hurry.

You hear it in the language: “*Watch out for Numero Uno.*” “*Nobody will care for you if you don’t do it yourself.*” “*The one with the most toys at the end wins.*”

But as much as Satan is enthralled by (and has enthralled) such “curved in on self” people, he is just as elated to have the “mugwumps.” That historically is a political term applied to people who defect from one party to another, and is thought to come from an Algonquin word *mugquomp* (or *mugumquomp*), “*important person, kingpin,*” and implied that such person considered themselves “better or holier than thou.” It has come to mean, at least as far as I first encountered the term, someone who cannot decide on their position, so they sit on the fence “*with their mug on one side and their wump on the other.*” Satan is very much more than content with people who aren’t quite sure how they fit into the community of faith . . . or who would like to entertain the notion that being in the community of faith does not mean stepping away from certain things of the world.

Are there such people? Absolutely! Survey after survey, poll after poll,

have demonstrated that, when it comes to values, behaviors, opinions, choices, and lifestyles Christians are, by and large, indiscernible from the rest of the culture. Christians (including, I might add, members of the clergy) have virtually the same incidents of divorce, substance abuse, depression, and dysfunctional behaviors. Christians (as a whole) seem to be on a par with the rest of society when it comes to racism, sexism, and antipathy toward marginalized people. Imagine how delighted Satan must feel when the Christian witness to the Gospel is so diluted by people who “fit right in” so well that they become invisible.

Now, of course, the question rises before us: *“Is any of that a reflection of me?”* I guess the answer to that depends on what mirror you look into. Self-examination would likely produce a quite favorable report, something along the lines of *“Well, I’m not perfect, but I’m not all that bad!”* If you invite the opinion of a spouse or offspring, you might get a somewhat more objective assessment (but they love you and do not want unnecessarily to hurt your feelings, so they pull their punches a bit). In the court of public opinion, you might be in for a rude awakening, unless you paid heed to the counsel found in Puddin’head Wilson’s Almanac, *“Let us endeavor so to live that when we come to die, even the undertaker will be sorry.”*

But if you look into the perfect mirror of God’s Word, whoa! Not so pleasant a sight! The Law is relentless in reflecting back to us every wart, scar, wrinkle, ingrown hair, splotch, and blemish we have about our person. And I’m not talking about the physical imperfections that show up under the florescent lights in the public restroom; I mean the distortions of our personhood that sin perpetuates in our lives. It is there, it cannot be hidden, and it is ugly.

So one of the temptations we fall prey to is the temptation to engage in self-denial. Here I am not speaking about placing a quarter into a small folder each day during Lent (a practice often encouraged in churches, much to the chagrin of the ones who had to empty out those little buggers — especially when people taped the quarters in there — then count them,

roll them, and get a hernia carrying them to the deposit box at the bank) . . . you may recall, they were called “Lenten Self-Denial Folders.” No, when I say “*the temptation to engage in self-denial*” I mean this facility we all have to delude ourselves that sin is not that big a problem in our lives.

On one level, we look around and can find myriad examples of people whose behaviors are so over the top that (we think) by comparison our offenses are minor. On a second level, we are loathe to call sin the sin in our lives; we prefer more neutral terms — peccadillo, error in judgment, lapse, bad habit, misstep. Such terms make us look not quite so bad. But whenever we do this, we give ground to the evil that is inside us and that makes it all that much harder to resist the evil that’s trying to get in.

What we learn from today’s Gospel is that our Baptisms are not so much an event, as a process. In Baptism, God claims us as His own, seals us with His Holy Spirit, forgives our sin, and restores to us our heritage of life. That’s done.

Now, look at Jesus as Mark tells the account: Immediately He is driven to the wilderness (a site, by the way, to be understood, not as a wasteland, but as a place for renewal and cleansing — that is what God did with the people of Israel over forty years in the wilderness) and He is tempted. Apparently, being baptized is an open invitation for spiritual attack. After His baptism, the next step for Jesus is to confront the forces of evil head (but please note, Mark does not inform us of the outcome of this temptation. Curious . . .).

This is very much in keeping with how Mark tends to deal with the whole account. If you rush to the end of his Gospel, you will find several variants on how it ends, but the most likely ending (the one Mark actually wrote and not some later apologist who figured to offer Mark a little “help”) goes thus: The women came to the tomb, found the stone rolled away, saw an angel who said to them, “***Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his***

disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Now here is how Mark ended his Gospel: *“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*

Why end it there? Because Mark wants us to respond. Without evidence, without appearances, without any kind of prop to faith but the bare witness: *“He has been raised; he is not here.”* Will you, do you, trust that?

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright published a book in 2010 with the title, *After You Believe*. He tries to address the questions: *“What happens after you believe? What are we supposed to do? How are we to live?”* In other words, what are the next steps? Pay attention to Jesus . . . see what happens to Him . . . know that something very much like it will be coming your way . . . maybe even immediately! So let the wilderness — for Jesus that meant an actual location with a specific inhospitable landscape and climate; for us the wilderness is often those moments when we run dry, when we are depleted spiritually, emotionally, physically, when we feel burdened by life, stressed out, brought low — let the wilderness become the place where you beckon the Holy Spirit to confront the evil that seeks to take up residence in your life.

Brian McGowan asks questions that may help us take the next step toward the wilderness being for us a place of renewal: 1) Assuming most of us were baptized as hapless infants, have we grown into that baptism? Have we let it really happen to us? 2) In some meaningful way have we ‘heard’ and do we still, ‘hear’ God calling us his beloved son or daughter now? 3) Are we facing up to the ‘devil’ in ourselves, including our own demons. Are we seeing, firmly and consistently, God as the answer to every testing? 4) Is God ruling in me? Or am I simply a usurper, a god of my own making, rather than a subject glorying in the fact that God has made me in his image?

Take the next step — follow Jesus.

Amen.