

“Can We Avoid Temptation?”
Mark 1:9-15

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In 1997, the movie “The Devil’s Advocate” was released. It starred Keanu Reeves and Al Pacino. Keanu plays Kevin Lomax, a happily married and very successful lawyer in America’s South. Down in the South he’s a man of integrity who’s focused on what’s important in life. Then he’s offered a job in the Big Apple, New York, with a worldwide law firm. Kevin and his wife move to New York only to find Kevin being seduced by the atmosphere of greed, sex and power that surrounds the firm, and more particularly its owner, John Milton, played by Al Pacino.

But we soon discover that there is more to this movie than the age-old theme of greed versus goodness. The plot is much more sinister. It turns out that John Milton is in fact the Devil, a devil who has learned to despise God and embrace self-satisfaction.

During the movie the Devil lets us in on his plan to seduce humanity. “You sharpen the human appetite to the point where it can split atoms with its desire; you build egos the size of cathedrals; fiber-optically connect the world to every eager impulse; grease even the dullest dreams with these dollar-green, gold-plated fantasies, until every human becomes an aspiring emperor, becomes his own God... And as we’re straddling from one deal to the next, who’s got his eye on the planet, as the air thickens, the water sours, and even the bees’ honey takes on the metallic taste of radioactivity? And it just keeps coming, faster and faster. There’s no chance to think, to prepare; it’s buy futures, sell futures, when there is no future!”

“Look at me” cries the Devil, “underestimated from Day One! You’d never think I was a master of the universe, now, would you? I’m a surprise, Kevin. They don’t see me coming: that’s what you’re missing.”

Here we are—on the first Sunday in Lent. What is Lent?—A season of prayer, repentance of sins, atonement and self-denial—a time to reflect on where we have been, what we have done, and who we may have harmed along the way—a time to reexamine our lives, our relationships with one another, and our relationship with God.

The lectionary offers us Mark 1:9-15 as the Gospel reading for the opening of Lent. As you just heard, our reading this morning covers a lot of territory in just a very few verses. In the first 8 verses of Mark’s Gospel, which I did not read—John the Baptist appears—John preaches repentance—John baptizes the people—John announces the coming of the Messiah. In the next 7 verses—which I did read—Jesus travels from Nazareth to the Jordan River—Jesus is baptized—God announces Jesus as his beloved—Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit—Jesus preaches his first sermon. Bang—Bang—Bang!

Any one of these events offers much sermon material, so how is a preacher to decide which direction to go? I usually go with the word or phrase that first jumps out to me, and in this case, it was *“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.”*

Now, there are some interesting differences between Mark's version of the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, and those of Matthew and Luke. The most obvious difference is Mark's lack of a detailed description of Jesus' encounter with Satan. The other difference is not so obvious, but one that I find fascinating. While Matthew and Luke both describe Jesus as being led or guided by the Spirit into the wilderness, Mark very specifically uses a word that means to eject, or expel, or thrust out. Jesus is "thrust out" by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. No gentle coddling, no kind encouragement—apparently, no choice. God seems to be saying, "This is a trial that you must face before you can begin your mission." There is some theological debate around the question of whether this trial was to see if Jesus would succumb to temptation, or to prove that he wouldn't, but I will leave that interpretation up to you. What strikes me most about this, though is God's insistence that Jesus experience the same type of temptations that we do.

Tony had finally gotten his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. He was ushered into the office of the executive buyer. An assistant brought them coffee. The atmosphere was cordial, and he knew he was going to give the best presentation of his career.

Then the assistant tapped on the door, re-entered the office and whispered something to the Executive Buyer. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." She followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed a contract on her desk. She had evidently been studying a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he could see the column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can.

He was tempted to move the can and see the bottom line of his competitor's bid. What harm could there possibly be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight, almost. After wrestling with himself a while, he finally decided to take a peek.

As he lifted the soda can, he discovered the can wasn't filled with soda at all. Instead it was a bottomless can filled with thousands of BBs, which gushed out, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short-cut the competition was exposed.

Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. Still, every temptation is a challenge. Whether we believe that temptation comes from Satan, or from the human heart, or from some mysterious evil that can't be identified, we are all vulnerable.

I guess it is no surprise that we frail human beings often succumb to the pressures of temptation. Whether it is a material temptation, like food, or alcohol, or cigarettes, or drugs—or a behavioral temptation, like stealing or cheating or lying—we really don't have a very good track record. That is why we need Jesus.

Jesus is the model of self-surrender to God. Christian tradition teaches us that Jesus was

without sin. Jesus freely chose John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, even though John protested. When the Holy Spirit pushed Jesus into the wilderness, he didn't try to get out of it. He went where God sent him and did what God expected of him. He never protested or defended himself against those challenges that he faced, because he knew that everything comes from God. Jesus showed us what it means to please God with everything we have.

And so, we begin our forty-day season of Lent—our forty days in the wilderness, admitting our weakness of past failures, repenting of our sins, thanking God for the grace extended to us, and facing our temptations, head to head, and overcoming those same temptations with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

However, just like any trip into the wilderness, we need to be selective of what we take with us on the journey. If we are hiking into the wilderness for a camping trip, what are the essentials? What do we take and what do we leave behind? What is essential to life, and what is not? Food, water, shelter, heat, light—okay, maybe toilet paper. When you have to carry everything on your back, some of those so-called necessities can become burdensome.

Now, what about the wilderness of the mind, as you do the deep soul-searching required during this Lenten time of self-examination. What is essential and what is burdensome? An open mind and an open heart, a truly repentant spirit, and a faith that God loves and cares. And what are the things to leave behind? Guilt, shame, feelings of unworthiness, unforgiveness of others, anger, and all those other negative feelings so common to the human heart.

This last week I posted a quote on Facebook—*"Grace means that all of your mistakes now serve a purpose instead of serving shame."* This is the purpose of Lent—to offer yourself before God with a contrite and humble heart—to allow yourself to be washed in the flowing grace of God's love—to turn the shame of your mistakes and bad choices into learning experiences to guide you on the path of God's will.

Many people dread the coming of Lent because they see it as a time of darkness and guilt and shame—but that is not how I see it. Just as Advent is a time of preparation as we wait for the incarnate God, Lent is a time of preparation as we wait for the Risen Christ. AMEN