

Are any of you here familiar with the Reader’s Digest books? Yes, they take best-selling books, and condense them a bit. So, when you hear the words “Reader’s Digest version,” you know you’ll be getting a shorter form of the original work.

I don’t know why they decided to do that, but when I looked at today’s Scripture lesson from the book of Mark, I think I know where the Reader’s Digest folks got the idea—from Mark.

Okay, maybe not. But just look at this Scripture passage. In just 7 verses, we have 4 adventures, and a summary of Jesus’ basic message. That’s a lot in 7 verses, only 6 sentences. Pretty well condensed.

Since this is the specific Gospel lesson assigned to the first Sunday in the season of Lent, let’s look at these 7 verses/6 sentences in some more depth.

The first adventure, or anyway first event, is in verses 9 and 10 and 11. Jesus comes and is baptized by John, in the river Jordan . This is a very, very special baptism; God’s Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus, and speaks to Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

It wasn’t a baby’s baptism, or a child’s baptism, or a repenting baptism, the kinds we are familiar with, these days. It was a baptism which marked the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, because it was time.

Yet, the same Holy Spirit which had descended peacefully and gently on Jesus, and which had spoken those wonderful approving and affirming words was the same Spirit which drove Jesus out into the wilderness, which in the Bible, usually means desert.

And what was that all about? It was the second adventure, in verses 12 and 13. This adventure had this cast of characters: the Holy Spirit, the man Jesus, Satan, the wild beasts, and the ministering angels, in the setting of the wilderness.

Satan, the personification of evil, was doing his best to tempt Jesus into wrong-doing and wrong-thinking. But Jesus was God’s Son, appointed to his post by the Holy Spirit, and he had animals to keep him company and angels to wait on him. He resisted all the temptations just fine.

Chances are, none of us have ever had this exact same experience. But we have faced temptation—and we have been helped by angels.

Temptation, in this case in the Bible, is not referring to the musical group, or the perfume. Temptation is what we all face when there is choice to be made. If we can resist temptation, and choose the good over the bad, we come out all the stronger, all the better. That is what temptation is for, it is not meant to trip us up.

According to Mr. William Barclay, those companions of Jesus in the wilderness, the animals and the angels, mean that “Jesus was not left to fight his battle alone—and neither are we.” (The Gospel of Mark, by William Barclay)

Isn't that a comforting thought? In fact, the computer resource about this Scripture puts this season of Lent itself into this kind of thinking too:

“. . . the church does not expect people journeying toward baptism, reconciliation, or deeper understanding of [faith] merely to 'go it alone' out there. Instead, the role of the church is like that of the 'ministering angels' to those we accompany on their journey. . .” (United Methodist Church Worship Page)

That's lovely—we can serve as ministering angels to one another, and especially now, during the season of Lent. Again, here are the computer resource's words:

“The season of Lent is all about 'going through' discipleship to Jesus with one another. We 'give up' something not for the sake of proving we can do it, but as signs of our submission to God's will and way through Jesus. We open ourselves up to let God have God's way with us. And at the end of this period of time, these 40 days, if we have truly submitted ourselves to the Spirit's driving, [we'll] be ready to act, to rejoice in and proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus, the king of God's kingdom, with our lips and in our lives. Our [ritual] enactment of these [Lenten] disciplines in worship or acts of personal . . . devotion are only preparation . . . [to become like Jesus]. And we are unlikely to do this without a committed “band of sisters and brothers' who will 'watch over us in love'” to spur us on, and we them.”

Well, that makes two adventures accounted for—let's move on to the last two, and the summary, and all in two verses and only one sentence!

The very beginning of verse 14 is an adventure: “Now after John was arrested. . .” I suppose Mark expected everyone to know that story, but hey, it's quite a story, and it is important.

John's ministry had been preaching stern sermons of repentance, and baptizing people, “a baptism of life change that leads to forgiveness and sins.”(The Message) He was called John the Baptist because he baptized people, not because he went to Maywood Baptist Church. Those don't sound like chargeable offense, and his lifestyle was one of utter simplicity.

However, King Herod Antipas had had John arrested because John had denounced the king's marriage to Herodias, the king's sister-in-law. And that marriage arrangement was scandalous—you aren't supposed to divorce your husband specifically so you can marry someone in his family, like his brother. This woman even caused John to be beheaded, but that is still another story and adventure.

So, because of this adventure, or misadventure, John's arrest, John's public ministry was over. And, Jesus, having survived his wilderness/temptation/preparation time began his public ministry.

And here is another thing I found on the computer:

“. . .at the end of 40 days of being tempted by Satan, Jesus did not return full of anger or bitterness; he emerged from that environment preaching good news to others.”

“He came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. “Time's up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.” (The Message)

That's what we are here for—to find God's kingdom—to change our lives—and to believe in Jesus—believe in hope and truth believe that God is a God of good promises kept, not cruel threats held over us. [And some Christians and some churches have wrongly presented God as cruel, rather than loving.]

We believe in Jesus and the peace and immortality and salvation he offers.

We can “take Jesus at his word. We can believe that God is the kind of God that Jesus has told us about, we can believe that God so loves the world that he will make any sacrifice to bring us back to himself, to believe that what sounds too good to be true is really true.” (William Barclay)

Let's live into that truth, and let's let this season of Lent be one which makes us grow as Christians, as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit working on us.

Amen.

(by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters)