

Sometimes the Gospel of Mark is like the Cliff’s Notes of the 4 Gospels – the Reader’s Digest version of the story of Jesus. Did you know there actually is a Reader’s Digest version of the Bible?...with the 4 days of creation and the 5 commandments?! (not really! – there really IS a Reader’s Digest condensed version of the Bible - but there are still 10 commandments in it!). Anyway – Mark is the shortest Gospel and of course if all you had was the Gospel of Mark you wouldn’t know it was so brief, but compared to its closest Gospel cousins Matthew and Luke (the synoptic gospels as they are called), Mark takes just a few verses to tell about the events that Matthew and Luke take chapters to describe, especially at the beginning. Did you notice the succinctness of what we read today? – baptism of Jesus – temptation in the desert – beginning of ministry – check, check, check – it’s all told in a few verses.

And it’s especially that temptation story of Jesus in the desert that is so brief – if you’re familiar with the temptation stories in Matthew and Luke, you know there is much more detail given – 3 temptations described complete with what Jesus and Satan say - a much more involved and seemingly complete story. With Mark there is simply this:

- the Holy Spirit compels Jesus into the wilderness
- Jesus is there for 40 days, tempted by Satan
- Jesus is with the wild beasts (presumably they get along quite well)
- the Angels tend to Jesus (presumably a kind of relief effort after the physical deprivation and spiritual temptation in the desert)

That’s it.

And did you notice it doesn’t even say what the outcome of the temptations is?! – it simply says Jesus is tempted – how do we know Jesus didn’t succumb to these temptations? Of course we could say we know the answer because Matthew and Luke tell us all the details – but what if we just had Mark? – are we meant to be in doubt as to what happens in Jesus’ encounter with the temptations from Satan? I’m not trying to suggest

that Mark does leave it in doubt – but I am asking where do we get the answer? – Mark doesn't give the details in the temptation story, so how do we know? And that's the intriguing thing about Mark's succinct account of the story – Mark's answer comes from what happens before and after the temptation. By going check, check, check thru baptism, temptation, beginning of ministry, Mark isn't trying to be rushed or condensed – what Mark does is very closely and clearly link what is happening in these 3 briefly told events. In the baptism, God the Creator through God the Holy Spirit declares the blessing of God the Beloved One, Jesus Christ; then Jesus the Beloved is compelled by the Spirit into the wilderness – temptation happens there; then Jesus the Beloved emerges from the desert saying 'God's kingdom is here – turn to God – I have good news'

What has happened here? The picture Mark gives is of Jesus emerging from temptation with the blessing of baptism still flowing fully; Mark shows us the baptized, beloved, blessed one coming thru temptation to say: 'it is the ways of God that endures – just look at me.' The answer to the temptations is found in the baptism and ministry of Jesus – that is what is real; that is what is true.

Did you ever think of Apostles' Creed as the Reader's Digest version of Christian faith? – it's a huge challenge to condense the Christian faith into just a brief statement. But have you ever noticed or wondered - where is the LIFE of Jesus in the Apostles' Creed? The Creed goes right from 'Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary' to 'Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate' - nothing in-between?! – nothing about Jesus' life?! I am not disparaging the Apostles Creed – it is a profound and enduring and ecumenical proclamation of our faith. But there is an issue to deal with there – the absence of a mention of Jesus' life in the Creed could give the idea that Jesus' life is not important – could be misused to conclude that Jesus' life is simply a set up for Jesus' death – so then the temptation story is just a way to certify Jesus' crucifixion as a perfect sacrifice for the sin of humanity.

Look in your bulletin – you'll notice we're not using the Apostles' Creed this Lent – not because we're replacing it! – but to give us a particular expression of faith to enrich

this Lenten season. And you'll notice that this 'Response of Faith' talks about the life of Jesus – 'Jesus healed and talked to children and befriended sinners' – Jesus had a life; and it talks about our lives – 'we are to be people of community for all, of just and peace' – we are to have a life, a life like Jesus. I am glad to have that voice for faith in this season: instead of the person of Jesus Christ being characterized as only about the cross and the resurrection - instead of Christianity portrayed as only being about heaven and hell – it points us to this truth: that what Jesus Christ and Christianity are about is the kingdom of God – and the kingdom of God is about Jesus' life and our lives. The thing is folks, heaven is all set – God is taking care of eternity; the thing that needs some work is right now – is life. Jesus didn't come just to bide his time until he could die and rise – Jesus lived in a way that embodied what his death and resurrection are truly about – which is that the ways of God are the ways of life; the ways of God are the ways of blessing. There is good news: God is with us in life - God wants for all the ways of blessing in life - God gives the way of life in Jesus Christ.

We are not just biding time here either - I think that's what the whole idea of Lent disciplines and commitments is about – of giving something up or taking on a commitment. If you are doing that to earn points with God for a trip to heaven - please stop! – it's worthless; if you are doing it as a drudgery or way to feel miserable - please stop! – it's the wrong direction. Why focus on a discipline or commitment that turn our lives to God's ways? – because life matters- how we live matters – the life of others around us matters. And the truth we are distinctly renewed in, in this season, is that God provides the way of life – the way of blessing. So if you are not doing a discipline or commitment – please do! - do something that turns you in mindfulness to God's ways - it renews us in the truth that how we live matters – to God, to others, to this world – life matters.

During this Lent we will hear and speak of covenant in many ways – the relationship between God and us. And here is a basic covenant truth - God's ways are better! – God's ways work! - it is the way of blessing. Do you believe that? – do I? -

believe that to follow God's ways is the way of blessing for you, for me, for all? The life of Jesus tells us it is - that God's kingdom brings healing and justice and love- it's good news. And the life of Jesus tells us it's difficult – following God means facing temptation, resistance, even crucifixion – temptation and death and violence and brokenness desperately try to get in the way. So you need to believe – believe God's ways are better – believe so you can turn from temptation of every kind to the good news of God's kingdom – and find there not deprivation, but blessing.

Do we believe it? - that the individual choices you make to follow God are the way of blessing for you – that it's better? that the choices we make as church, community, nation, world – to follow God's way of love and justice – are better – better for us, others, for creation, for all?

Here's a Reader's Digest version of this sermon: come to this table and be nourished in the life of Jesus Christ- his life matters; be nourished to believe that in Christ is the way of blessing for your life and for all – believe it when you are tempted, that your life matters; be nourished to believe the good news, the kingdom of God has drawn near. AMEN.