

“The Time Is Fulfilled” / Mark 1:9-15 / 26 February 2012 / Lent 1B

Lent is upon us, and Lent always begins with this story of Jesus’ strange temptation in the wilderness. To me, the word temptation brings to mind those old cartoons where Bugs Bunny has a little red rabbit on one shoulder telling him to do something naughty and fun, but there’s an effeminate little white bunny on the other shoulder, vainly pleading in a high-pitched, dreamy voice, for him to resist. Temptation! What is your greatest temptation in life? What is temptation to you?

Some years ago, we lived in a small town. It was so small that when someone asked for your phone number, all you had to tell them was the last four digits. Everyone for miles around shared the same six digits at the beginning of their telephone numbers. In any case, some friends in this town entered a competition to lose weight; it was modeled on that TV show “The Biggest Loser.” There were four teams of four people taking part in the weight-loss race, and the teams all had self-deprecating names like “The Fat-tastic Four,” “The Chub Club,” and “The Tryglicerides.” The race began on Ash Wednesday, because everyone agreed that resisting temptation was best in Lent. And so, on Shrove Tuesday—their last day for donuts, and breakfast sausages, and ice cream—all the contestants got weighed, and their picture was printed in the local paper. It was a very public way to lose weight. And in that newspaper photo, you can almost see the fear in their eyes—and the hunger. As if to say, “Okay! Now my picture’s going in the paper, so there’s no backing out. I’m locked into a new lifestyle, a whole new diet of carrot sticks...and celery sticks...and grass clippings. Hot tea with lemon, no sugar, no honey. Bananas to satisfy my sweet tooth.” Oh, the many shapes, the many faces, of temptation! The temptation to fall off that 1,500 calorie per day diet could look like just about anything: a spoonful of salad dressing, a Hostess Twinkie, a handful of potato chips. Temptation is one of those things you have to be experiencing to understand. Temptation is intensely personal; my temptations may not appeal to you. Temptation always pretends its own innocence.

But tell me, what could possibly have been tempting Jesus out there in the deserts of Palestine for forty days? He wasn’t tempted to overeat; there was precious little to eat. He wasn’t tempted to get drunk; there was barely even any water, much less wine. He wasn’t tempted to indulge in sexual appetites; he was all alone. Was he tempted to stare at the sun, throw stones at the scorpions, bite his nails?

Well, remember, for 30 years Jesus had a quiet life. As an adult, he went with the crowds to be baptized by John, and coming up out of the water, he had a crazy vision of God, swooping like a dove. He heard a voice declaring, “You are my child, my beloved.” And then that dove chased him out into the wilderness, where Jesus had to come to grips with a new identity, as “God’s beloved,” an identity both liberating and dangerous. But new identities mean the end of old identities. And that’s hard.

I’ll tell you what Jesus was tempted to do: He was tempted to go straight back to Nazareth, take the “closed” sign off his woodworking shop, take up his hammer and his saw, and make some nice tables to sell. He was tempted to turn his back on this scary new identity as God’s beloved. He was tempted to go back to his old life and live out his days quietly. Any fool can see that John the Baptist is going to get himself in trouble. Jesus was tempted to spare himself the same pain and sorrow.

But as soon as John the Baptist gets arrested, the temptation passes, and Jesus steps up. He had been tempted to live his life as if he were not God’s beloved—for being

special entails both privileges and responsibilities. But do you want to know how I know that Jesus was tempted to keep his head down, and play it safe, and live as if he were not God's beloved—even though Mark never tells us as much? I know because it's the very same thing that tempts me, too. And it tempts you. Our greatest temptations come not from the bottle, or the grocery store, or the Internet. We're tempted to live small lives that make little difference in the world, keeping our heads down, pretending that we're not the very instruments that God has chosen to bring about a new and better world. Addiction, pornography, overeating: these things can ruin lives, but they're just symptoms of that greater temptation to remain the same when we know that it's time to change. But John the Baptist is gone, and if you and I don't step up, who will? It's Lent, a time to live dangerously, a time for new identities, so put down the hammer and saw. Dare to claim your identity as God's beloved.

In my favorite children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak, a boy named Max puts on his wolf suit and makes mischief until his mother sends him to bed with no supper. In Max's room, a forest grows, and an ocean tumbles by with a private boat, to bear Max across the sea, "and in and out of days, and almost over a year" to the place where the wild things are. They "roar their terrible roars, and gnash their terrible teeth," and roll their yellow eyes. But Max tames them by staring into all their eyes without blinking. Max becomes the king of the wild things...but eventually he gets bored, and he smells dinner cooking halfway across the world, and he wants to be where someone loves him best of all. The wild things protest: "Please don't go! We'll eat you up, we love you so." But again he sails "in and out of days and almost over a year" to the quiet of his own room, to find his supper waiting for him. "And it was still hot."

The message of that wonderful, slightly dark little book is that the wilderness with its wild things is right here in our own rooms, in our own minds, and if we want to tame it, we have to look it full in the face. Of all the dark desires that human flesh is subject to, none is more sinister than the subtle temptation to go on living as we've always done, to hide from the knowledge that we are God's beloved, to shirk the responsibility of it, to go back to Nazareth to our tape measures and wood planers. The greatest temptation of all is *not* to be spectacularly evil, but merely to be commonplace, to play it safe, to forget the fact that we are called to make a difference. The temptation is not to evil actions but to harmless inaction. Ironically, though one road leads us back to easy old Nazareth, and the other leads to a splintered cross, fullness of life always entails a cross.

"The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the good news." Time's up. Lent is a time to change. Why is it so hard to accept the fact that you are the beloved one of God? Because if you belong to God, then you can no longer live as if you are your own. If you're beloved of God, then you have to live like it, seeking not just your own happiness, but the well-being of the world. If you're the beloved one of God, then it matters how you spend your time, and what you do to your body. If you are the beloved of God, then you have to act. If you are the beloved one of God—and you are—then it is time to change. And you know what needs changing. And so our greatest temptation of all is to live as if we're nobody special, because nobody special gets to live a self-centered, self-serving life. Lent is upon us, summoning us out to the wilderness regions of our life, there to confront our own wild things, the familiar old demons that bid us remain the same, to lead small, inwardly focused lives. Don't go back to Nazareth. Dare to embrace your bold new identity as God's beloved. Amen.