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Newport News, Virginia  
March 1, 2009

*The Desert of Temptation*  
Mark 1: 9-15

We are ill equipped to understand the idea Mark presents in today's gospel text: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." We had a good laugh in our staff meeting last Thursday when someone admitted that at first glance the sermon title looked like "The *Dessert* of Temptation." Coming during Lent, that title might have been a worthy one.

If Lent is about anything, it is about discipline. Now, there is nothing directly biblical about Lent. Easter and its related events are "moveable feasts." It does not fall on a fixed date, as Christmas does. Instead, Easter's date is determined by the lunisolar calendar, just as the Jewish Passover is—a moon phase during a certain solar time of the year. Easter is observed on the Sunday after the first full moon on or after the day of the vernal equinox—an event that happens twice a year when the sun is directly over the equator.<sup>1</sup> So, Easter always falls on a Sunday between March 22 and April 25.

The forty days of Lent that we celebrate—forty, not counting Sundays—comes right from our text today of Jesus being in the desert wilderness for forty days. The biblical number of days is meant symbolically; we use it for our timeframe of discipline, literally. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent continues through the Saturday before Easter.

And, as I said during the Ash Wednesday service, the forty days of Lent are closely related to the forty years of Moses leading the Hebrews through the desert wilderness. Their temptations were many: wanting to go back to Egyptian slavery, not trusting God for daily bread, not trusting Moses, replacing the mystery of God with a tangible golden calf, and living in disorder.

Our way of easing through the terrain of Lenten disciplines is to pass them off more lightly. Often, the question of "What are you giving up for Lent" is answered with "chocolate." Some of the more clever answers I've heard this

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<sup>1</sup> From the "Computus" article in Wikipedia, February 27, 2009.

year include “rutabaga,” “sampler food at Costco,” and I won’t mention some of the others.

The purpose of any spiritual discipline is to put yourself in a greater “position” (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) to encounter God. The sacrament of communion in the Presbyterian Church is viewed that way, though you won’t find those words in the Book of Order. Unlike several churches, Presbyterians do not believe that the wine transforms itself into the literal blood of Christ, or that the bread transforms itself into the literal body of Christ. The Presbyterian language about communion is that it brings us into the “real presence” of Christ. It has a good chance if we put ourselves into a mental and spiritual frame of mind.

The discipline of “giving” can do the same thing. In the act of tithing (giving a tenth of our income) or giving an offering to the church, or giving to worthy charitable groups, we consciously focus away from our own needs and focus on the more important needs of the world and others. The by-product is that we use more wisely the resources we have and find ourselves happier and more grateful with them. If our giving moves beyond a legalistic mindset, we put ourselves in a “position” for a deeper experience with God.

Spiritual disciplines are for the purpose of helping us keep our spiritual eyes open. What is the Browning line:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush aflame with God. But only those who see take off their shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

It’s the same with fasting or praying or meditating. If you want a classic on the Spiritual Disciplines, you need to read Richard Foster’s *The Celebration of Disciplines* – a book the Discussion Sunday School Classed has been using for their study.

So, what was the wilderness of temptation that Jesus was driven toward? It was a place and time to wrestle with who you are and what you need to be doing in life. The apostle Paul disappeared for three years in between his Damascus Road experience and his reappearance in Jerusalem. The Hebrews wrestled with their place in this world for some years between their exodus from

Egyptian slavery and their crossing the Jordan into Canaan. During that time, they developed into a nation.

Many seekers of God were driven to the desert wilderness during the fourth century. Constantine became the Emperor of Roman in 306. “Constantine the Great,” as he is known, converted to Christianity (about 313 C.E.), at the age of 40. As a Christian head of state, he discriminated against the Jews, declared war on Egyptian Donatists Christians because of their differing beliefs about the sacraments, he executed his wife (Fausta) at the demands of his mother, he called for the Council of Nicaea to push orthodoxy in the Christian Church which ended the early church’s ordination of women, and he led a Christian Crusade against Persia, even as Persia called for negotiations and reconciliation. Celibacy began in the priesthood during this century.

During this fourth century, the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Persia were inhabited by men who were on a quest for “salvation”—not in the sense of going to heaven when they died, but to strive after the Kingdom of God which stood in stark contrast to the Christian Roman Empire of Constantine’s influence. These men left behind the ways of the world to discover the ways of God in this desert setting. It is this that the wilderness temptations and Lent are all about. St Anthony, one of the Desert Fathers, responded to another hermit’s question: “... whatever you see your soul to desire according to God, do that thing, and you shall keep your heart safe.”<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Merton’s *The Wisdom of the Desert* provides a history of the Desert Fathers and an anthology of their sayings.<sup>3</sup> Restating Merton’s characteristics of these spiritual ancestors into desert temptations includes the likes of arrogance, self-centeredness, impatience, satisfying our anxiety with the “tongue and belly”—over-talking, over-eating..., and legalism. Matthew and Luke’s version of today’s gospel reading isolate three temptations Jesus had in the wilderness with Satan. Mark’s passage only says that after hearing words that could go to your head—“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”—the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. Those words of commendation and affirmation turned into events that would test, question, and vet Jesus as a true

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York, New Directions: 1960), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

spiritual leader. Just as Jesus had to desire “purity of heart,” so do all who truly follow him.

The temptation to conform, to please others, to say what gets us ahead, to be rude, arrogant, impatience, self-serving...the temptation to live in our own world is ever before us as we make our way through the wilderness of the desert on our way to the Promise land. Foster warns his readers, “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”<sup>4</sup>

At a Youth Specialties Conference in Orlando a few years back, I met Brennan Manning, one of the conference leaders. Having listened to an audio conference series of his, my primary reason for attending this conference was to meet him. Brennan is a Catholic priest of the Franciscan Order. Before he responded to his call to priesthood, he served as a marine during the Korean War and in a foxhole witnessed his best friend dive on a grenade to save his life. Priests normally take the name of a saint as their own at the point of ordination vows. Father Manning was allowed to take the name of his closest friend—Brennan—who died protecting him. Following his time in the marines and into priesthood, Brennan Manning struggled with an addiction to alcohol—struggling, I’m sure, with issues of guilt and trauma over the violent death of his best friend.

At one point, Manning joined the Little Brothers of Jesus of Charles de Foucauld, a religious order in Algeria, committed to an uncloistered, contemplative life among the poor. His time in this religious order was spent transporting water by donkey in the desert mountains, serving as a dishwasher in France, and spending six months in a remote cave in Zaragoza, Spain. Father Manning eventually became a parish priest in New Orleans.

One of the interesting dynamics of his life is that he is now married—meaning that he had to give up his parish ministry when he decided to marry. Still, Manning has been one of the Catholic Church’s leading preachers and conference leaders.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1988), 7.

Our friendship was quick. I invited him to lead a Spiritual Enrichment Week at First Baptist Church of Meridian, Mississippi, where I was pastor at the time. (There are Baptist Churches that are open, progressive, and grace-filled.) At my invitation a year later, Manning was also the guest speaker for the ecumenical, citywide, Christian Unity Service. He stayed in my home on that trip. In a late-night conversation, I asked him how he came to be married as a Catholic priest. Brennan told me that after meeting Roselyn, his life was filled with an added love. Following that new love would mean giving up his ministry as a parish priest. That's when he went to back to the Order of the Little Brothers of Jesus and spent six months wrestling with his call to ministry in a cave in the mountains near the Moroccan border. He came away with the conviction that his love of Roselyn would enhance his ministry in life rather than deter it, even if it meant making a radical change away from the parish.

Manning understands that the spiritual disciplines put us in a "position" which increases the likelihood of encountering God and being directed by God.

As we move through the next four Sundays of Lent, I want to continue with "Desert Temptations," focusing on the disciplines of service (*Going Beyond Ourselves*), meditation and worship (*A House of Prayer*), study (*Seeking the Truth*), and submission (*Spiritual Authority*). On the sixth Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday, our worship will be led by the adult choir's presentation of Faure's "Requiem."

## Prayer

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest;  
To give, and not to count the cost,  
to fight, and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil, and not to seek for rest,  
to labor, and not to ask for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do thy will.*

(Ignatius of Loyola)

**Genesis 9:8-17**

8Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." 12God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." 17God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

**Mark 1:9-15**

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."