

February 18, 2024
1st Sunday of Lent
Mark 1:12-15

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Background:

Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus follows right after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan. His account of both the baptism and the temptation are very sparse. The natural tendency might be to fill in the details of what "actually" took place with information from other gospel accounts. But if the reader is willing to reflect on what Mark does include, they will be rewarded by a deeper understanding of the temptations of Jesus.

In the opening verse of the gospel text, Mark states that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert. Mark's community would be aware that "the Spirit" was the expression of the great power of God throughout their religious tradition. Some examples of this are in the texts that follow.

In the first, the Spirit enabled Othniel, who helped the Jews defeat their enemies:

"Because the Israelites had offended the LORD by forgetting the LORD, their God, and serving the Baals and the Asherahs (foreign gods), the anger of the LORD flared up against them, and he allowed them to fall into the power of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim, whom they served for eight years. But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a savior, Othniel, son of Caleb's younger brother Kenaz, who rescued them. The *spirit* of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD delivered Cushan-rishathaim, king of Aram, into his power, so that he made him subject." (Judges 3:7-10)

Another example is when Samuel anointed the young shepherd, David, as the next King, and the Spirit came upon him to guide him:

"Jesse sent and had the young man brought to them. He was ruddy, a youth handsome to behold and making a splendid appearance. The LORD said, 'There--anoint him, for this is he!' Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand, anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and from that day on, the *spirit* of the LORD rushed upon David." (1 Samuel 16:12-13b)

It was also that same spirit who came upon ordinary people and led them to be great prophets of God. The same spirit who animated so many people throughout the Jews' history was now acting once again to drive Jesus into the desert.

Mark states that Jesus was driven into the desert and was tempted by Satan for forty days. Both the great prophets Moses and Elijah fasted for forty days. The desert is a hostile place, inhabited by bandits and those who have rejected normal social relationships. More important, it is the place of Israel's testing, a testing that they repeatedly failed, and becoming unfaithful and testing God's covenant with them. Mark does not describe how Jesus was tested, but, stating that Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the reign of God, the reader knows that Jesus has come away from that testing victorious over the power of Satan.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your image of the desert? If you were going to ask an artist to draw a picture of the Spirit leading Jesus into the desert, what would you suggest should be included in the image?

2. Have you ever been tested in your life in order to prove or demonstrate your worth? (You might think of being on a sports team, debate or chess club, musical production, or an employer.)
3. How did you feel about being tested at the time? How did you feel afterward, and how do you feel about it now, looking back?
4. Do you think there is a connection between Jesus' experience in the desert and his ability to proclaim the reign of God?
5. Where do you see the action of the spirit operating in your life?
6. Does this gospel lead you to see a way that you might be challenged by the spirit of God in your life? How might this season of Lent be a time for you to embrace the Spirit, who might be testing you so that you too can more boldly proclaim the reign of God?
7. Can you take time to talk with God honestly about whatever thoughts or feelings this gospel might have brought up within you or about your desires for your Lenten journey this year?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for February 18, 2024, the First Sunday of Lent

God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals that were with you and came out of the ark. I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth."
God added: "This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you:
I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.
When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds,
I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings."

*Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.
Your ways, O Lord, make known to me; teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.
Remember that your compassion, O Lord, and your love are from of old.
In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O Lord.*

*Good and upright is the Lord, thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice, and he teaches the humble his way.*

Beloved: Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the Spirit. In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison, who had once been disobedient while God waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons were saved through water. This prefigured baptism, which saves you now. It is not a removal of dirt from the body but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

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Excerpts from Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25:4-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; and Mark 1:12-15

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for February 18th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. This is the first Sunday of Lent. The gospel has Mark's short description of Jesus going to the desert, driven by the Spirit, for forty days, among wild beasts, and being tempted by Satan, and ministered to by angels. Then Jesus goes to Galilee and begins his ministry, proclaiming, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

The other readings also have references to the Lord's saving power, his compassion and love from of old, and showing sinners the way, and establishing and keeping a covenant, especially the one with Noah. The first reading from Genesis is where God establishes his covenant with Noah: "I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant. The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings." Psalm 25 proclaims, "The Lord shows sinners the way," and adds, "Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant." In the second reading, from the first letter of Peter, he writes, "in the days of Noah, those saved through water prefigured baptism, which saves you now."

On this first Sunday of Lent, the gospel and the second reading both have brief references to the Spirit and to angels. Peter writes, "He was brought to life in the Spirit, and is at the right hand of God, with angels. Both angels and the Spirit will come up again when we reach the Easter season, at the end of Lent. Also, this gospel makes reference to the start of Jesus' ministry. At the end of Lent, we will be hearing about the end of his time on earth. The message he proclaims when he starts his ministry is relevant at that beginning time, and at the end of his time on earth, and just as much now in our day: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!