

## LENT I

*He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.* Mark I: 14

As always, Mark's Gospel is spare and to the point. Jesus is baptized by John; the Holy Spirit descends upon him; Satan drives him into the wilderness where he remains for forty days, tempted. Angels attend him. John is arrested, and Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee. All in six terse verses.

Mark does not tell us what Jesus' temptations are. We may remember from Matthew's and Luke's accounts that Satan tempts Jesus with enticements of power and popularity, with the lure of contesting God's supremacy, and with the seduction of going over to the dark side – that is, of worshiping Satan himself instead of the God of Israel.

Mark leaves the temptations to our imagination. And we are freer, therefore, to ponder our own temptations, pitfalls of the spirit which may seem less grandiose than those Satan holds out to Jesus.' What, indeed, does this strange, abrupt story have to do with us?

As I prayed this week about Jesus' time in the desert what came to me was the injunction: *Do not lose heart. Do not lose heart.* Of course, this message is a timely one for all of us, in our world's current economic crisis where so much that we have taken for granted seems imperiled. *Do not lose heart*, was certainly a theme of President Obama's address to Congress and, really, to the nation, the other night.

But the message came to me in a more personal way, with more local application. I was under the shadow of a mystery I'd been reading, a story that included a vicar in a small English village who took the opportunity of several local and very grisly murders to preach collective sin and guilt to his community. I thought, *how destructive such preaching is, how soul-killing. How little do most of us, at any time, need to be scolded from the pulpit. How many of us have been driven away from church and even from faith because of the preaching of an anti-Gospel, a message of judgment and condemnation.*

Honestly, when I hear the stories so many of you tell me, stories of rejection by your families or churches of origin; rejection because you are gay, or divorced, or simply because your ideas of God and religious faith and practice differ from what you were taught– when I hear of and remember the deserts, the spiritual wildernesses so many of you have inhabited – I marvel at the depth of spiritual need and the strength of faith that has brought you here and keeps you here. I thank God for the miracle of your presence. I

praise God that somehow you have not lost heart, or that, somewhere along the way, you have regained heart, and found your way into our sacramental community.

Many traditional theologians would say that the greatest sin is despair – the final, ultimate losing of heart, losing of hope. That sounds to me both true, in some formal theological way, but also unbearably harsh.

Again, as I was meditating about Jesus' time in the desert, an image came forcibly into my mind: the image of a young woman I came to know when I was in treatment for alcohol addiction. She presented herself to me so vividly that I could not keep her out of this sermon. Her name was Nyssa, she was 19, I think, and she was from Jamaica.

She was a dancer, lithe and lovely, and she used all her free time to dance on the asphalt outside our unit. She danced compulsively, addictively, in her heroic struggle to leave her other addictions behind. She danced until the souls of her feet were in bloody shreds.

Her other addictions were legion. Alcohol and drugs – I remember her telling me about some drug she took, frequently, that would cause her to vomit for 48 hours. So clearly she had an eating disorder. But I remember her telling me that she thought her greatest addiction was to men. She also told me that the one time she'd ever met her father, he'd called her by the wrong name. So I suppose being addicted to men – seeking for attention and love – misguidedly and dangerously in the form of sex, was not so surprising.

But the scariest thing Nyssa told me was that she wasn't sure she wanted to leave her addictions behind. Of course, all of us were in treatment because we had not been able to imagine life, or manage life, without our substances of choice. But certainly while we were there for a month– immersed in twelve step philosophy and practice 24/7, having committed a month of our precious lives to gaining sobriety– most of us were determined to beat our devils of addiction. We had to be, to stay the course.

But Nyssa was not so sure. Perhaps she was just more honest than many of us. The success rate for treatment centers is, after all only 50% at best. But most of us at Hazelden had to believe in a sober future. We were living in hope. But Nyssa was not.

Her mother came up for several days of family work. I remember meeting her on a pathway between the buildings. I introduced myself to her and said, "I've grown very fond of your daughter." "Want her?" she asked. "Take her. She's yours." I wished at that moment, and I have often wished since, that I could have taken Nyssa. In fact, I asked her if she'd like to come and live with us in Boston. She said she would love to.

And I think we both meant it, and meant it more profoundly than most such wishes and plans that were hatched by folks during that month. But it never happened

Nyssa left a day or two before me. She was terrified to leave, terrified to go home – home – a place charged for her with rejection, terror, and failure. We went together to retrieve her cell phone and other items that had been confiscated during her stay, and then we sat outside waiting for the car that would take her to the airport. We exchanged phone numbers, and promised to stay in touch.

In the months after I returned from treatment, I tried to get in touch with a number of my fellow inmates. Most of all, I tried to reach Nyssa. Her phones – the landline number and the cell phone, would ring and ring. Once, I believe, she tried to call me. I remember exactly where I was, standing at the ironing board, looking at a caller i.d. that I was sure was hers. But when I answered, nobody spoke at the other end. She never called again, and I never reached her.

I am very sure that she is no longer alive. Nyssa, I believe, lost heart, lost it to despair. Or it might be fair and accurate to say, her heart was killed. And her body followed into death.

Before I ever met her, I believe, Nyssa had entered a desert of temptation and despair from which there was no return. Perhaps, at Hazelden, she found a few angels to attend her for a little while. But we were not enough, and no wonder. She fell victim to forces of evil that overpowered her young and frail spirit, she lost heart.

I don't believe in the person of Satan. I don't think there's a real guy with a forked tail and a spear roaming around looking for prey. But that figure symbolizes something very real– symbolizes that force of evil that claimed my friend Nyssa. Evil comes in many forms: addiction, child abuse, sexual cruelty, are just what I *know* Nyssa endured, and there are many other shapes and names for evil.

And all of us are tempted by one or another of Satan's forces, and probably by more than one. All of us at times have been imperiled, have risked losing heart, have come close to succumbing to despair. As Jesus was.

As Jesus was. One of our temptations, as we hear this story of his forty days in the desert, one of our temptations is, surely, to think, *well, he's divine, He's God's Son, God's beloved. It can't have been so bad for him.*

But I think we can't give in to that temptation, my dear friends. We can't believe *it wasn't that bad for him.* It was that bad for Jesus. Mark's story of the forty days in the

wilderness tells us that. And Paul reminds us of a Jesus *who was tempted in every way as we are*.

It was that bad. But Jesus got through it. Angels helped him. Probably they helped him by reminding him what he had heard at the moment of his baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. “ I suspect that memory, that reminder, that knowledge, got him through.

It’s the same message he heard, and we heard, last week, in Mark’s Gospel story of the Transfiguration. God delivers the message to Jesus and his close disciples on the mountaintop, as they are about to head down toward Jerusalem, toward suffering and death. You are my beloved, my child. With you I am well pleased. “ And once again, that memory, that reminder, that knowledge, gets him through.

And that, my dear friends, is what gets us all through, isn’t it. That’s what saves us from despair, from loss of heart, from the death of the heart. That memory, that reminder, that knowledge, that we are God’s beloveds. All of us, every one.

Amen