

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**March 1, 2009**  
**Mark 1:9-15**

**“Just Three Words”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today, on the first Sunday in Lent, our Scripture reading is the story of the temptation of Jesus. Since January we have been bouncing around in the Book of Mark—the oldest of the four Gospels, the one considered the most authentic, the shortest and sparest of the Gospels. For weeks our Scripture readings have been stories about Jesus’ life found in the Book of Mark...Jesus’ Baptism, Jesus calling the first disciples, Jesus’ time in Capernaum and the man with the unclean spirit, Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law, Jesus touching the man with leprosy—all in Mark, Chapter 1. Last Sunday, we heard the story of the Jesus’ transfiguration in Mark, Chapter 9.

Our reading for today finds us back in Chapter 1—we are picking up the thread of Jesus’ story where we left off when he was baptized in the River Jordan. Immediately following his baptism, Jesus was “led” or “driven” (depending on which Biblical translation you read) out into the wilderness for forty days of prayer and fasting. At the end of that time, hungry and vulnerable, he was tempted by Satan.

The temptation of Jesus is an important story in the life of this newly baptized preacher just beginning his ministry. Jesus’ ministry only lasted about three years—so the forty days he spent in the wilderness is quite significant in the overall story. The details of the temptation are noteworthy because they tell us who Jesus is, what he is made of, how he relates to God—and the story foreshadows the trial that awaits at the end of his life.

In the Gospel of MATTHEW, the temptation of Jesus is a long story—it occupies eleven verses in Chapter 4. We learn about how Jesus was famished when “the tempter” came to him at the end of his forty days, how he was presented with three different and powerful temptations, and how he resisted and responded to each one.

In the Gospel of LUKE, the story of the temptation has even more detail and is even longer. Found in Chapter 4 verses 1-13, the temptation story in Luke describes how Jesus was “led” by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He fasted and somehow in his weakened state was able to resist the temptations the devil placed before him. The story in Luke includes considerable dialogue between Jesus and the devil.

The temptation is an important story with significant detail and considerable explanation in both Matthew and Luke. And so why in Mark is the entire temptation story condensed into one sentence?

After Jesus’ baptism, Mark tells us that Jesus is headed for the wilderness. (“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”)

Okay, now he is there.

Then the ENTIRE temptation story in the Book of Mar—the full forty days, the hunger, the devil, the three temptations—is reduced to ONE line.

Mark 1:13

“He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

That’s it. Now this is truly economical writing.

One sentence is all we get.

One sentence that has a whole world behind it. One sentence, like a little portal we are allowed to peak through, one sentence behind which are intense experiences we can only imagine. Mark gives us one sentence and assumes we will fill in all the details, all the feelings, all the essentials.

Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wilderness and was visited by the devil.

And Mark gives us one sentence—expecting us to fill in all that Jesus experienced...the loneliness, the communion with God, the hunger, the weakness, the fears, the temptations, the resistance, the relief.

Mark gives us one sentence as compared to Matthew and Luke who devote verse after verse to this story. So what’s with Mark?

How shocking is this?

How spare and truncated.

AND HOW TRUE TO LIFE.

**The one sentence summary of the temptation of Jesus found in Mark reflects the way so many of us live our lives—we walk around with enormous stories inside us and we share them, cautiously, with just a few words.**

We walk around carrying huge experiences that have shaped our lives or are currently affecting our lives and we speak of these experiences with just a few little words.

We hold inside us huge stories that have influenced who we are and how we see and move through the world and we reveal these stories with short, clipped one sentence summaries that are tiny portals, little windows opened just a crack...little windows that have enormous stories lurking there behind the words.

Listen now to some sentences, each sentence just three words—abbreviated, lean and clipped—and imagine the stories, the intensity, the whole world that exists behind just three words.

My husband drinks.

I was fired.

She left me.

He was arrested.

I have cancer.

We got divorced.

She is missing.

I'm in recovery.

He's been deployed.

She came out.

I couldn't sleep.

He hit me.

She's been deported.

He's using again.

We broke up.

The money's gone.

He was wounded.

I ran away.

She's been busted.

He never returned.

I fought back.

During our lifetimes, we have all said some of those three-word sentences.

And just like the one-line story of the temptation in the Book of Mark, a whole world lies behind those few simple words.

And it is a world that we may have faced alone.

We may have, due to shame or isolation, fear or inhibition, faced difficult times, times of trial and pain feeling very alone.

Just as Jesus was alone in the wilderness fasting and praying when the devil came to tempt him, we have felt alone when we were tempted, left, hurt, frightened, abandoned, sleepless, broke, drunk, wounded, lost, or exposed.

Just as Jesus was alone in the wilderness when Satan appeared and tempted him with powerful, seductive temptations, we have been literally alone or felt profoundly alone when we have faced the dark night of the soul—the wilderness where we were driven or led.

Earlier in our service, we sang a Spiritual that gives words to that lonely place when we face hard life experiences and feel all alone.

The Spiritual names the loneliness Jesus must have felt so often during his lifetime:

*Jesus walked this lonesome valley,  
he had to walk it by himself;  
O, nobody else could walk it for him,  
he had to walk it by himself.*

The good news hidden in that woeful Spiritual is that Jesus did walk the lonesome valley, **he has been there**. Jesus has known pain and fear, he has felt alone in a world that felt foreign, frightening and threatening.

Like us, Jesus has known a whole world hidden behind a few little words that others cannot know. He has been there.

And so I ask you to recognize and to remember that when you feel alone, you are not alone.

Jesus has walked the lonesome valley, he has felt pain and fear, temptation and sorrow.

You may hold stories, painful and profound stories that lurk behind words like:

I was fired.

We got divorced.

I couldn't sleep.

He hit me.

She's using again.

We broke up.

I'm in recovery.

The money's gone.

You may hold profound stories conveyed through a few simple words but you are not alone. Jesus, our brother, teacher and friend has been there.

In the wilderness, alone and tempted, on the shoreline spent and weary, in the temple followed and harassed, on the hillside questioned and heckled, in the garden frightened and trembling, Jesus has been there.

The Book of Mark gives us one sentence to describe the whole story of the temptation and yet we fill in the rest of the story in our own minds.

Sometimes we give each other and sometimes we give Jesus just three words to describe the pain and fear we are carrying in our hearts.

And yet Jesus knows the rest of the story.

Jesus hears our few simple words and fills in, adds the details. He sees and surmises. He has been there, he can complete picture.

So we may say just three words that both hide and reveal an entire story...

My husband drinks.

She's been busted.

He's been deployed.

I ran away.

She came out.

He was wounded.

She's been deported.

Those few, simple words may represent lonely, desperate times.

But Jesus has been there and he has a few simple words of his own.

Jesus has a few simple words to say to you.

So when you are inside one of those hard and lonely times, get very still, open your heart to God, ask God to come to you and speak to you, and then listen.

Deeply.

You may hear Jesus whisper these words in your ear:

I am here.

You are blessed.

You are safe.

All is well.

You're not alone.

Don't be afraid.

I love you.

Amen.

