

Jesus waged war with Satan

"It can't be Lent already!" I can hear you clear over here.

Lent surprises us as much as Christmas does. It always seems to come sooner than it should. The approach of Christmas reminds us of all the preparations we have to make -- cards, decorations, shopping, baking, etc. The approach of Lent reminds us of the spiritual preparations we have to make.

You may have memories of Lents that demanded hard work leading to Easter joy. Long weeks of joyless fasting gave this season a serious feel for the average Catholic. Today we often wish our Lents were more. If we don't miss the challenge, we miss the inner growth this season could bring through its discipline and sense of Catholic community. Lents are actually harder now, since the Church invites us to devise our own discipline for the season.

The temptation of Jesus in the desert ushers in the season every year. The season hits us head-on with a story of suffering and temptation. In the earliest Christian centuries the Church borrowed this story of Jesus to introduce a season of self-denial. Since Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness in reparation for his public ministry, we spend 40 days in Lent to prepare for the proclamation of Easter.

Lent got its start as a season for catechumens. Baptism was the one Christian symbol that most powerfully sacramentalized the resurrection: death to one life, rising to another. So the period prior to baptism became a time of holy preparation for those joining the Church.

But those already in the Church, inspired by the catechumens, sought interior renewal as well. Soon everyone else started imitating the 40 days of Jesus in the desert. And when the catechumenate fell into disuse in the early Middle Ages, we were left with Lent, a season of suffering, fasting and self-denial, adopted by all who follow Christ.

This year we hear Mark's accounts of the temptation. Take a close look at Mark's version. It will help if you read it you were learning this story for the first time. It's very sparse. Mark doesn't recount what the temptations were as Matthew and Luke do. He doesn't even tell us that Jesus fasted. He only says that Jesus went into the wilderness because the Spirit drove him there, and that he spent the time with Satan, wild beasts, and angels.

Some details are important here. "The Spirit drove him out." Yes, this is the Holy Spirit, forcibly hurling Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus doesn't just happen to be in the desert; he's there on purpose. Nor has he gone to the wilderness to get away from it all. He has gone to wage war with Satan.

Disappointingly, Mark does not tell us the outcome of the temptations. Maybe he thinks we should know Jesus wins. Maybe he explains the victory as the exorcisms unfold in the chapters ahead. Maybe the victory won't be the battle between Jesus and the underworld extends throughout the gospel.

What are the wild beasts doing there? We're not sure. Oh, they could just be part of the landscape, but Mark's details usually have more meaning. Perhaps the wild beasts are cohorts of Satan. Perhaps since they are wild they signify the chaos that resulted after the fall of Adam and Eve, which now needs to be reconciled. Perhaps their inability to disturb Jesus signifies the ultimate victory of Christ over all creation.

Remember, Mark's main question throughout his Gospel is, "Who is Jesus?" His description of the temptation tells us that Jesus is the one who engages in cosmic battle. Up from the waters of his worst enemy. It's like baseball's preseason -- we find our enemies and launch right into conflict, though the real battles will come later.

The rest of this passage sounds a lot like one we heard a month ago. That's because it is the same. After the temptations, Jesus preaches the core of his message: Repent and believe. This command will guide us through Lent and the rest of the year.

Lent is our wilderness. We go into Lent not just to get away from things, not just to give things up, but to meet the devil in conflict. What are the sins and temptations that keep us from Christ? How can this Lent prepare us to fight them off?

How does your parish fail in its response to the Gospel? To what renewal is Christ calling you?

What spiritual conflict becomes an issue in our civil society? How can you help fight the battle in at least one small way this Lent?

If you feel like Lent snuck up on you, it may be that the Spirit has hurled you into the wilderness. You're not there by accident. You're there to fight.

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