



Celebrating witness expressed through service (diakonia) and leadership offered by the ELCIC's diaconal ministers.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.—Mark 1:14

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT **Text: Mark 1:9-15**

Welcome to the season of Lent. Have you ever been asked if you are going to give something up for Lent? Augustana University has daily Chapel services. Local congregations bake and provide snacks for the students to be distributed after the service. Usually these snacks are comprised of something sweet, like homemade brownies or cinnamon buns. But during Lent, the snacks are bland and simple, like flat breads and crackers. Why? Because Lent is traditionally a season of reflection and repentance. Lent is the Christian equivalent of the New Years resolution. A chance for contemplative reflection and an opportunity to return to the Lord and rethink some of our more nasty habits and lifestyles. I have heard of people giving up some of their biggest vices for Lent. People giving up things like caffeine, wine, chocolate or smoking.

To kick start this season of repentance and reflection our texts always begin with the narrative of Jesus going out into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. The gospels of Matthew and Luke provide much more detailed accounts of the temptation of Christ. Mark provides only a few verses, stating that Jesus is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for forty days and nights and is tempted by Satan. While there he was among wild animals and the angels attended him. What lesson can we glean from this brief account of the temptation of Christ? Moreover, as this is also a Sunday set apart for the celebration of Diaconal Ministries, what can this text tell us about the role of those called to serve our church?

Sadly the text of the temptation of Christ is often used as a motivational type of story that makes Jesus a special role model for resisting temptation. If Jesus can resist great temptations in order to fulfill his ministry then surely I should be able to resist eating a candy bar. Sound familiar? But what if we are looking at this whole story all wrong? What if Lent isn't about changing what is wrong but instead focusing on what is right. What if we focus not on giving something up for Lent but instead look at how we can allow our lives to be led by the Holy Spirit to add something.

Mark's brief account of the temptation of Christ immediately follows the story of his baptism. It is during the baptism that Christ is given the affirmation that he is God's beloved Son with whom God is well pleased. Following this profound affirmation Christ is immediately driven into the Wilderness where he

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is surrounded by wild beasts and the angels attend him. He doesn't get a chance to bask in the comfort of hearing God's affirmation and love. He is immediately sent out by the Spirit. While most of us would want to follow such a mountain top experience with a meditative walk, Mark makes a point of showing Jesus leaving quickly with purposeful steps. It is as if Jesus leaves for the wilderness with the knowledge that he is to face a battle. Yet, even as he is in the wilderness and is being tempted by Satan, God's protection and love go with him, and the angels attend him.

Mark does not provide any narration about the temptation that Satan gives to Jesus. For Mark the important things to highlight are that: 1) The Holy Spirit led Jesus to the Wilderness and 2) The protection of God went with him. God's angels attended him among the wild animals. Mark begins his account of Christ's ministry with a proclamation and affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God and moves through the story of Christ's death and resurrection to a proclamation and affirmation that we all are children of God. What if we faced this season of Lent not as a time to reflect on what is wrong with our lives but instead celebrate how God is active and participating in our lives. How is the Spirit leading us through the wilderness? How are we experiencing God's protection in the wilderness of our lives? How are we receiving and sharing the promise of God's covenant to make us his children.

Let's be realistic for a moment. Reality is that life is hard. There are moments in all our lives where we feel like we are wandering out in the wilderness. We are struggling to manage the demands and stresses of our lives, and we are often faced with the temptation to just "give up" and throw in the towel. What would it mean for you in those wilderness moments of life to realize that God's protection surrounded you and his angels attended you? What do you need to experience in those moments for you to feel the promise of God's covenant with you? How is the Spirit calling you into the Wilderness?

So many of us adopt a "fake it until you make it" attitude. On the outside we appear calm and confident but inside we are terrified. That doesn't have to be so if we are led by the Spirit. Jesus was led by the Spirit and the angels protected him from the wild beasts. There is an interesting book written by Thomas Butts called *Tigers in the Dark*. It tells of a time when the electricity went out at the Barnum and Bailey Circus. For a few minutes all was in total darkness. It was at the moment in the show when the trainer has just stepped into the cage with the tigers. The trainer was caught in a moment of fear. He knew the big cats were all around him and they couldn't see him and he couldn't see them. But the trainer decided to fake it until he made it. He cracked his whip and shouted commands. Because he knew that the tigers did not know that he could not see them.

When the Spirit leads us into the wilderness we do not need to just fake it until we make it. We go there, knowing that God's protection goes with us. Jesus was not left alone to face the wilderness, God's angels

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attended him. He was not alone, and neither are we. Sometimes we need to remember that angels can have human hands. Willie Nelson sings about an angel flying too close to the ground. Angels do that sometimes. They come in the person of friends around us, who meet us at the point of our deepest need, and minister to us with the love of Jesus.

Diaconal ministry is the ministry of reaching out to people in those wilderness moments of their lives. It is about attending to those who feel as if they are on the outskirts of traditional ministries. It is a call to proclaiming God's word and extending a hand of service to those in the wilderness. It is a call for all of us. This Sunday is set apart to be a moment when we focus on Diaconal Ministry. The logo used by diaconal ministry depicts a dove (shaped like the outstretched hand of service) going into the world. There is not anything radically special or unique about those that are called into diaconal ministry. These are individuals who let the Spirit lead them into the wilderness. They respond with ministries of word and service. Wilderness is a reality of Christian life. Just as there will be mountain top experiences and affirmation there will also be moments of darkness and wilderness. For some the wilderness they experience may be far away from the Church and for others it might be right inside their front doors. Diaconal ministry responds. Some serve far away from the Church, others are right inside the front doors.

What if for Lent this year, instead of pledging to give something up, we pledged to add something to our Lenten journey. What if we listened to hear how the Spirit is calling us into the wilderness. What if we decided that we would add an attitude of service. What if we opened our hearts and eyes to the wilderness around us and reached out in service, in diakonia, to each other.

One of the most moving scenes in English literature comes at the end of Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. Carts were rumbling through the thronged streets of Paris to the guillotine. In one of them were two prisoners. A brave man who had once lost his soul, but had found it again; and now was giving his life for a friend, and beside him, a girl—little more than a child. She had seen him in the prison, and had observed the gentleness and courage of his face "If I may ride with you," she had asked, thinking of that last dread journey (to her death). "Will you let me hold your hand? I'm not afraid, but I am little and weak, and it will give me more courage." So when they rode together now, her hand was in his; and even when they had reached the place of execution, there was no fear at all in her eyes. She looked at the quiet, composed face of the man beside her, and said, "I think you were sent to me by heaven." (Quoted by James Stewart, *The Strong Name*, Charles Scribners Sons, 1941, New York, p. 164)

So he was—and so it will be. For each of us—as for Jesus—"And the angels ministered to him."

So as you journey into the wilderness of this season of Lent, how is the Spirit leading you?

