



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

Lent 1

The Mission Begins

Identity, Reflection, Task

Gather the group together with prayer for this Lenten journey, and pray that God might bless the conversation and reflections on the way.

Mark 1:9–15

The Baptism of Jesus

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just

as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Begin by having a participant read the biblical story out loud. Let the group rest in silence for a moment, reflecting on what they have just heard. Then in small buzz groups (3 to 4 people) have the group discuss the first questions. Depending on the size of the group, this could get a little noisy, but that is okay. The point of it all is to engage people with the Word and to allow them to engage with one another—5 to 7 minutes will probably be sufficient, but the volume in the room will be your best guide.

- 1) What is going on in this passage?
- 2) What phrase or action jumps out at you?

Some background information might be helpful. In Jewish thought, the word "wilderness" generally referred to a place of struggle: a place of seeking answers to difficult spiritual questions, and direction and strength for what lay ahead. Biblical accounts of people in the wilderness, and indeed all the great characters in scripture, with few exceptions, spent time in the wilderness (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the People of Israel, Elijah, Zechariah, John the Baptist and Paul, to name just a few) for a proscribed time and a productive purpose.

It might well be of worth to note that in biblical numerology, the number 40, whether referring to years or days, did not refer to a specific period of time but rather meant "a long time." With this information in mind, have the group divide into small talking groups (the size of the assembly will help determine the size of small groups, but eight people should be the maximum) to discuss the next question for 8 to 10 minutes.

- 3) With this information in mind, what new insights might you have into this passage?

The Markan account of the "Temptation in the Wilderness" is rather sparse compared to the accounts from Matthew and Luke. It would be useful, and indeed more engaging, to move to the more familiar version of this event. Again, have the passage read aloud.

Luke 4:1–13

The Temptation of Jesus

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Again, in the same small groups, discuss the next question (10 to 15 minutes).

- 4) What added insights about Jesus' spiritual struggle with the nature of his mission and ministry do you find with Luke's account? How did this experience help him come to terms with who he was and what he was about?

Now share with the group this re-telling of the conversation between the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus in Dostoyevsky's classic poem:

During the 16th century in Spain, at the very height of the Inquisition, Christ appeared unannounced in the streets of the city of Seville. As he went about caring for and healing the poor, the sick and the lame, the people began to recognize him and flock to him. An old Cardinal also recognized him and had him arrested.

That night he had a visitor. The Grand Inquisitor entered his darkened cell and reprimanded Christ for appearing again and getting in the way of the Church's work. You are offered three tools to bring in your kingdom and rule the world. You were told to change stones into bread. Imagine the possibilities...bread for the hungry...people would have followed someone who fed them. But you refused! It was suggested that you throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple and let God's angels sweep you up before you came to harm. People would have been amazed. Everyone would have followed you. But you refused! And you were offered authority and power over all the kingdoms of the world. But you refused! In all of this you wanted people to follow you out of love or not at all. And look where it got you.

Well we have corrected your mistakes and we're doing well. We cannot let you hinder what we are trying to do. And so tomorrow you will

die. Jesus said nothing in reply. Rather he looked into the eyes of the Grand Inquisitor for a long time and then walked over and kissed him. Oh how that kiss burned. The Grand Inquisitor stepped aside and let the Christ escape into the night, saying to his back as he left, "Do not come back again."

In small groups once again, take a few moments (10 minutes) to talk about the following question:

- 5) With all of this in mind, how do you think this testing in the wilderness strengthened and prepared Jesus for the task he was called to do?

You might want to share what Jesus reads from the scroll in the synagogue just a few verses later in Chapter 4.

Luke 4:16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say

to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Home Stretch

In small groups for the final time, discuss these last questions (15 to 20 minutes):

- 6) Putting all of this together, how might the scripture passages we reflected on today speak to those of us who are trying to be followers of Jesus right here, right now, in our own unique context?
- 7) What action(s) might we be called to engage in as we leave this place today?

Draw the study to a close with a prayer for the church, for one another and those in need of our prayers, support and love.

Produced by the



General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2015

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