

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: Genesis 9:8–17; Psalm 25:3–9; 1 Peter 3:18–22; Mark 1:9–13

Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is taken up by both Matthew and Luke, Matthew being the more familiar since Western Christians have, until the 1970s, usually read Matthew whenever possible in preference to Mark, Luke, or John.¹ So, it's a little hard for me to think about today's gospel from Mark without thinking of the conversations the "tempter" in Matthew, the "devil" in Luke, has had with Jesus. But Mark only says this, "[Jesus] was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him."²

What Mark the evangelist cares about is that you and I know that Jesus has begun his ministry, proclaiming, "The time has been fulfilled, and the dominion of

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 171–73.

² Mark 1:13.

God has come near!³ Change your mind and believe, trust, in the Good News.⁴

In Mark's world, demons are responsible for disability, sickness, and death. But I think it's fair to say also that in Mark's world, women and men are responsible for the choices they make about seeing the world as it really is and about believing in God's will for their lives. About halfway through Mark's narrative, it's clear to Mark's Jesus that women and men do not hear in his words and do not see in his deeds that "the dominion of God has come near."⁵ They do not change their minds; they do not believe. Jesus' journey of suffering, death, and resurrection begins—and this journey is God's plan. The battle with demons continues—and continues in our own day.⁶

Few of us today would see sickness, sin, and disability as works of the devil. But it's impossible, I think, for

³ *Translation* Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 171.

⁴ My translation following Davis. See <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/02/the-beloved-tested-son.html>, (accessed 18 February 2018).

⁵ Marcus, *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

any reasonable person today not to recognize the reality and power of evil.

If I were speaking to a group of adults who knew very little about Jesus Christ, I might begin by spending a lot of time reflecting on personal sin and the enormous variety of lesser sins that also have a certain power to wound and alter the lives of others. But evil, in my mind, is a much greater problem.

Few of us were untouched by the news of the evil done in Parkland, Florida, on Ash Wednesday. The news reports of the past few days reminded me that we are still waiting to hear why the group of police who first responded to the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, in June two summers ago, and were inside the building just as the shootings were beginning, were withdrawn by the SWAT team commander.⁷ So, the real killing inside would then go on for another three hours.⁸ I'm inclined to believe the news reports that authorities were warned about the

⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/hours-body-camera-footage-orlando-nightclub-shooting-released/story?id=47753356>, (accessed 18 February 2018).

⁸ https://www.wsj.com/articles/florida-shooting-suspect-charged-with-17-counts-of-premeditated-murder-1518704958?mod=ITP_pageone_0&tesla=y, (accessed 18 February 2018).

Parkland shooter, and ignored them, are true. Evil is still abroad among us. In the end, we Christians have only words of faith and of hope to face suffering in its many forms and death in its many forms: the words of resurrection to the life of the world to come.

Mark doesn't mention at all the ways in which Jesus was tempted by Satan—that's only in Matthew and in Luke, who were using what scholars now call "the Sayings source" or "Q", from the first letter of the German word *quelle*—q-u-e-l-l-e—meaning "source." This text does not exist, but as the late Raymond Brown wrote, it "remains the best way of explaining the agreements between Matt[hew] and Luke in material they did not borrow from Mark."⁹ More important for Mark is that Jesus was not deserted by God in his journey, even when it seems he is alone—as it will seem in Mark when Jesus dies on the cross.

The season of Lent probably has its origins in a practice that emerged over the course of the third century as Christian communities around the Mediterranean world developed a fairly intense

⁹ Brown, 122.

three-week period of preparation for those who were going to do something illegal, something that could result in poverty, torture, and death: becoming a Christian. It was not uncommon for those who were not yet baptized also to suffer. The deaths of unbaptized Christians, also martyrs, were held in very great esteem.

As a young adult, new to the Episcopal Church, I found the discipline of giving something up for the season of Lent spiritually helpful. It would not be until I got to seminary that I learned that Sundays were never Christian days for abstinence and fasting.

One of my Roman Catholic friends who is still in his fifties (I am not), reminded me that in his church the traditional fasts—not abstinence—on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday were not obligations for people who are sixty years of age and older. That said, I don't eat a lot on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but enough to do my job. And for what it's worth, I continue to find a modest weekday Lenten discipline helpful.

I believe that humans are made to be in relationship with their Creator. When all is said and done, I think

our biology—and however our souls arise from our biology—has a place for us to be aware of God and to be in relationship with God. I think parents have a duty to help children be aware of God’s presence in their lives, especially very young children. I’m glad that I was led to belong to a Christian tradition that encourages every individual to take responsibility for his or her own life—and to recognize that we all have a responsibility to others.

I wrote in this week’s newsletter that one of the unexpected joys of Ash Wednesday was sensing real joy many times during the day, when I realized that, if I were to cross paths with many of the people who were kneeling or sitting in the pews, it would not necessarily occur to me that they were practicing Christians. And yet here we were, beginning Lent together. The Holy Spirit really is doing far more in all of our lives than you and I can ever be aware of. I hope you and I can be a little more aware in the ordinary course of our days of how God is still working in our lives and helping us to believe that his dominion has come near, to continue to be open to changing our

minds when needed, and to believe the Good News of everlasting life.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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