



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## A Familiar Temptation

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 1, 2009

*First Sunday in Lent (Year B)*

Mark 1:9-15

The way Mark tells it, the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness sounds awfully familiar. Not familiar in the sense of being well-known. That kind of familiar belongs to Matthew or Luke. You know, the stones-to-bread, jump-off-the-Temple kind of familiar.

No, Mark's temptation story is familiar in an entirely different way. I'm talking about the kind of familiar that you feel way down deep inside you when you hear a story that rings so true that it scares you. And Mark's temptation is that kind of story—at least for me.

I know he's more than a bit thin on details. Like one of George Costanza's girlfriends on *Seinfeld*, Mark seems to “yada, yada, yada” over the best parts of the story. There are no juicy tidbits as to what the tempter said or did—but if I could choose only one version of Jesus' temptation in the gospels, I would choose Mark's every time. And my reason may surprise you. I would choose Mark because he doesn't let me off the hook.

Oh, I know Matthew and Luke don't intend to let me off the hook either, but in a strange way they do. Their detailed versions are so specific that I find myself missing the real temptation that Jesus faced in the wilderness. And that temptation—the big temptation, the one overarching temptation—is also the same one that hounds me every single day, and I would be willing to bet it hounds you too.

Mark may not give the details some crave, but he does give us a clue as to what sort of temptation Jesus really faced. Did you see his clue? After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove and then Jesus hears the voice of God sounding into his very being. The voice—for the first time in the gospel—confirms for him who he is: “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Still dripping with baptismal waters, Jesus doesn't even get a chance to catch his breath—to process what he's heard—before he finds that the dove has grown talons and Jesus has been gripped by the Spirit and cast—or driven—into the wilderness to face temptation. Do you see what Mark has done? By moving straight from the confirmation of Jesus' identity to the temptation in the wilderness, Mark has shined the spotlight on what the tempter was up to. The tempter wasn't trying to get Jesus to fudge some numbers on his tax return or run away with the woman at the well or inject his way into the hall of fame. No, the tempter went after something deeper. He tried to get Jesus to forget his identity—to forget who he was and to be somebody else.

When you think about it, that's really our temptation as well, isn't it? To forget who we are, to lose our identity? Tom Long made a passing comment about this text during the

discussion of someone's paper in our preaching group a few years ago. He said, "Most of the pain in the world is caused by the fact that so many people have never heard "you are my son; you are my daughter—the beloved with whom I am well pleased."

In baptism, God speaks such a word to us. God marks us as Christ's own forever and names us as God's beloved children. That is who we are. We have been given our identity, and the good news is that it's not something we have to earn or accomplish but it comes to us as sheer gift—as grace. Do you know what a gift it is to have your identity rooted in what God thinks of you? For your identity not to be determined by what others think of you, or even by what you think of yourself?

To confess the Christian faith means that we have been given our central identity in life. Who we are is defined by Jesus' life and death and resurrection, and his values become our own. We learn to love the things Jesus loves; to welcome the outcast and the sinner; to walk in his way; to share our bread with the hungry; to bring good news to the oppressed. And our hope is that our identity in Christ will give shape to everything else we may do.

Too often, however, it works the other way. Our culture tends to put a premium upon what we do more than upon who we are. After all, one of the first things we do when we meet somebody new is to ask them: "What do you do?" On one level, that's an innocent enough question—one I've asked another more times than I can count. But on another level, it can turn into something more dangerous, because we tend to define someone solely on the basis of what they do. That's particularly frightening in the midst of today's uncertain job market, when there are no guarantees. It's almost as if the person they are and the job they do blend into one, and when the job goes, everything else crumbles as well. We have got to find a way to separate identity and role.

That's true for all people, but I've come to see that it's a particular hazard for pastors. Those who went on the first trip to the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina have sure enjoyed telling about my ill-fated attempt to separate myself from my profession. I knew we were going to be living in community at a local church with church groups from across the country and that if the others learned I was a pastor, I would be an easy target for all the prayers before meals and the like. And so from about the time we hit I-81 all the way to Mississippi, I jokingly reminded those in my van that I was not to be introduced as a pastor. But do you know what they did? Any time they introduced themselves to someone from another group, they would also turn and say, "And this is John 'I'm not the pastor' Leggett." I'm still finding ways to thank them for that.

On the mornings that I take Rachel and Sarah to school at Cub Run, we always have the same conversation in the car. I encourage them to watch for a chance to show kindness that day. And then I ask them, "So who are you going to be today? And whose values are you going to live by today?" They've answered those questions enough times now that I suspect they don't even think about it much anymore. But I do. I know that once that car door opens, all bets are off. I sometimes feel as if I'm driving them into the wilderness where the tempter's voice will call to them to settle for some other, some lesser identity.

I said before that Mark doesn't give us the details of Jesus' temptation. The truth be

told, that's not quite right. You've just got to step beyond the boundaries of the story. In order to see the details, you're going to have to read the rest of his gospel.

Jesus, you see, faces temptation all throughout Mark's Gospel. In almost every story, every encounter, Jesus is tempted to be less than he is called to be. He is tempted to soften the truth of his proclamation, to remain in places that were safe rather than following the path to the Cross. The temptation Jesus faced wasn't something he could deal with and, with a sigh of relief at having finished with that, move on to other things. No, Mark is telling us that Jesus' temptation is exactly like our own. It's not the huge temptations to do wrong that are the most dangerous to us. No, it's the temptations we face every day of our lives as we try to follow the costly path of discipleship—as we follow the one who said, “If you want to be my followers, take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

These are the temptations Jesus faced in Mark's Gospel. And there was never a point that they stopped coming. But there was also never a point where Jesus didn't live out of his true identity as God's beloved child.

I recently learned of a definition of sin that makes sense in this connection. We too often define sin as doing something wrong. You know, stuff like greed, and violence, and adultery, and theft. But the sin that Mark indicates we're tempted to has more to do with our vocation—with who we are—than with what we do. So I like that a couple of writers describe sin like this: “Sin is rebellion against God—the wrenching of life from its roots in divine purpose.”

“Sin (is) the wrenching of life from its roots in divine purpose.” All through the pages of Mark's gospel, Jesus is following that divine purpose for him all the way to death on a cross. And no matter how the temptations were voiced, no matter who was asking, no matter whether they were asking from the right motivations, Jesus refused to be wrenched from what God intended him to be, even if that meant his own death.

The church's season of Lent is a time for study and self-examination. It's a time to discover how we may have turned from God and to turn back to the source of our life. These forty days before Easter give us a time in the church to consider the ways that we are being tempted to an easier discipleship rather than the costly faith that Jesus invites us to pursue. These temptations will come to us as individuals and as a community of faith. And they will come to us every day that we try to live faithfully in light of what happened to us in our baptisms. Daily we will be called to turn our hearts to God, to remember the voice that says “You are my beloved child,” and to live out of that identity and calling.

Next week, you will make promises with God and me and Alayne as we gather around the font to baptize Aaron. In the midst of your promises to love and nurture Aaron, I want to ask you to make one more promise. I want you to help him remember his baptism so that he will remember who he is.

It was a couple of years ago now when Brandon, a child of this congregation, did that very thing for me. Brandon, who was a second grader at the time, is not yet partaking of the bread and cup and so he comes to me for a blessing. The first Sunday we did that, Brandon walked up to me, smiled as he looked up at me, and I simply did for him what I

have done countless times to my own children or others from the congregation. I traced the sign of the cross on his forehead and reminded him that he belongs to God, and I encouraged him to remember his baptism, and then I blessed him in the name of Christ. But Brandon did something I hadn't expected. It dawned on me as I reached for Brandon's forehead that he was doing the same to me. This child of God reached up to me and traced the cross on my head, and he spoke words of blessing, reminding me that I belonged to God too. In the twinkling of an eye, that ordinary time broke open and I felt the Spirit's talons gripping me tightly as Brandon reminded me who I am.

I want us to do that for one another—to be a blessing people. And, if it's true that much of the pain in the world is because so many haven't heard “you are my son—you are my daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased,” then perhaps we can speak those words outside this place as well so that our words and our deeds—indeed our whole lives—bear faithful witness to a God who loves us, to a God who will never let us go.