

## **“The Wild Beasts Within”**

Date: February 21, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Mark 1:9-15

Occasion: Lent 1, year B

Theme: Temptation

During a spelling test, fourth-grader Billy was stumped by some of the more difficult words. The thought came to him, “Look at Jamie’s paper; she’s really good at spelling. She always gets them right.” Billy heeded the voice inside his head and copied several of her answers onto his paper.

When it came time to collect the tests, Billy’s teacher observed his inner struggle. Before turning his paper in, Billy lowered his head for a moment and then suddenly tore up his paper. Whereas as first he had yielded to the temptation to cheat, he finally decided to take a zero rather than be dishonest.

Calling the young boy to her desk, the teacher quietly said to him: “I was watching you, Billy. I’m really proud of you right now. Today you passed a much bigger examination than your spelling test.”

Jesus also faced temptations, just as we do. Scripture tells us he was tempted in every way that we are. His victory in the wilderness, and his victory through the cross, can inspire us to find strength in the midst of our own temptations.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The Christian invitation during Lent is also a lifelong invitation – to allow ourselves to be transformed into the life and holiness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, the truth is that we will always have temptations, no matter how old we become. They will look different in our 80’s than they do in our 20’s, but they will still be with us. How can we face them and have victory over them? That’s what we want to discover this morning.

In the gospel lesson today from Mark, the text tells us that when Jesus was in the wilderness, there were wild beasts. Perhaps Mark was referring to lions, wolves and bears. But I'd like to suggest that within each of us there lives wild beasts: pride and anger, lust and greed, envy, sloth and gluttony. Those are the seven deadly sins, and there are more.

We as human beings were made in the image of God. At Creation God declared our goodness. But sin entered the world and we became fallen creatures, falling short of the glory of God. Even though Christ has ransomed us from our sin, Christians still struggle against it.

The reality is, we are both sinners and saints, and there is a struggle that goes on inside each of us. We have this desire to do good and to please God, and this other desire to do what is selfish and can be hurtful to others. At times we even hurt others when we don't mean to. We struggle.

Malcolm Muggeridge once pointed to two symbols found on medieval cathedrals as appropriate symbols of the life of faith. One is the steeple; the other is the gargoyle. The steeple symbolizes the heart reaching for the infinite God in Heaven. The ugly gargoyles represent the wild beasts which live within us, reminding us of our mortality and our sinfulness.

Jesus, out in the wilderness, faced the wild beasts, the various temptations which Satan threw at him. Jesus consistently chose God's path. How did he do it? What had he learned that enabled him to have victory over the Tempter? I think there are three principles Jesus practiced which will assist us in our own struggle against temptation.

First, Jesus trained himself to remember his Father's words. Eve was defeated in the garden because she got into a discussion with the serpent, listened to his reasoning, and forgot what God had told her.

The same thing can happen to us. When we are faced with a

temptation, it is so easy to listen to the other voices, to the wild beasts within us. Voices that say things like: “It’ll be ok, just this one time.” “Go ahead, you deserve a break.” “God’s gonna forgive you anyway, so go ahead and indulge yourself.” The inner voice tries to rationalize sin until it becomes easy to say “yes.” And we can forget what God has told us.

When Jesus was tempted by Satan with pride, power and possessions, he did not defeat the Tempter with skillful debating, or some great show of will-power. Jesus responded to every temptation with the words of His Father. Jesus knew the Scriptures and relied on them when faced with temptation.

The second skill Jesus learned, which we would do well to copy, was to focus on His Father’s face. When he stayed centered on what God desired, Jesus did not give in to his own desires – which were tested while he fasted in the wilderness. I love the following story which illustrates how to do it.

There once was a man who wanted to train his dog in obedience. He would place a piece of meat next to the dog on the floor while giving the command, “No!” Oh how that dog must have felt the urge to take the meat. It’s simply instinct for a dog to want to eat meat. What an inner struggle.

Should he obey his Master’s command, or do what he wanted? With time, he mastered his instinct and never took it. The dog-trainer commented, “He never looked at the meat. He simply kept looking at my face. The dog seemed to know that if he looked at the meat he wouldn’t be able to resist the temptation. By steadily looking at his Master’s face, he overcame the temptation.”

Can you see the lesson for us? “Always look to the Master’s face. If we keep our eyes fixed on God and on the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be able to have victory over the wild beasts within.

Here’s what I’ve discovered in my own experience in the time of trial and testing. God’s presence is found in the struggle. God becomes even more real to me when I turn to God in the face of temptation. I realize how much I need God to get me through this situation. God’s presence is revealed in the very heart of life’s trials and tests. Let’s keep our eyes on the Master.

The third lesson we can learn from Jesus’ trial in the wilderness is this: He did not have to face His trials alone. Mark tells us there were angels ministering to Jesus in the wilderness. Friends, the choice between good and evil are always ours alone to make. But we do not have to struggle alone. There is help.

Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weakness, one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” That tells me that Jesus knows what we’re going through, and He is able to help us, if we call on his name.

1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful and God will not let you be tempted beyond your strength. But with temptation, God will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

God will provide us with what we need. So, lest there be any confusion, God is not the One who does the tempting. But God does allow it to strengthen our faith. God does not try to trick us or make us give in to temptation; that is not God’s nature. But God sees us in our need and will provide what we need. God provides the way out.

A little story before I close: Once there was a young boy who wanted a pair of skates. His parents wanted to teach him the value of money and so informed him that he would have to save the required amount from his allowance. That would take several weeks, but they wanted him to understand that things cost money.

Several weeks had passed and then one afternoon the boy's mother overheard him in his bedroom counting his money. Just then she heard the bell on the ice cream truck ringing loudly in the street outside. So the mother waited to see what would happen.

There wasn't a sound from the boy's room until the truck had gone and the bell could be heard no longer. Then, a childish voice was heard in prayer, "Dear Jesus, please don't let the ice cream truck come down my street anymore."

Cute story, but the boy realized he needed help and turned to Jesus. We would do well to copy that boy's example. Jesus has a lot to teach us about resisting temptation.

Jesus learned to resist temptation by remembering God's Word, by keeping his attention focused on God, and by not trying to do it by himself. Lent commemorates Christ's forty days in the wilderness. Just as Jesus faced the Tempter out in the wilderness, Lent is a time for Christians to face the wild beasts within.

With Christ's help, we too will be victorious. Amen.