

THE REV. BRIAN BACKSTRAND

The Gospel of Mark has the delightful or vexing habit of cutting everything down to the bare bone of narration. Take the story of Jesus in the wilderness. By contrast, Matthew and Luke pile it on. But in Mark, the temptation of Jesus, presented to us on this first Sunday of our Lenten journey, makes it simple. Jesus is led or driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness; he is tempted by Satan; he stays in the wilderness forty days; he lives with wild beasts and angels wait on him. Let us look and reflect upon a two of these spare phrases from Mark.

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. Here we have an inversion. Jesus moves from the glory of baptism, the hovering presence of the Spirit and the voice from heaven only to be plunged into a place of isolation. *Drove* is an interesting term. It suggests forceful constraint. Also note that *spirit* in Hebrew and Aramaic is feminine. And so we have a forceful, feminine presence driving Jesus out into the wilderness.

Over the past few days, I suspect most of us have been watching the Olympic Games. While we have witnessed successes, we have also witnessed hopefuls missing the medals.

In the Gospel competition for what is in and what is out of the scriptural canon, the Gospel of the Hebrews, among others, missed the cut. Still, consider this phrasing from that Gospel: *Just now my mother the Holy Spirit took me by one of my hairs and brought me up to the great Mount Tabor.* In a way, Jesus misses the medal ceremony. Instead he is unceremoniously *driven*, forced, pressed into a place of isolation where he is to remain for the requisite forty days -- a place of isolation and privation that he shares with major figures in the Hebrew tradition including Moses who fasted forty days and forty nights and the Israelite people who themselves wandered for forty years. And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness: phrase one.

Phrase two is more difficult--especially in light of the tragic events of Ash Wednesday: *He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.* Satan. We have not only been watching the Olympic Games over these past few days, we have been also watching the tragic events in Parkland, Florida where, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, seventeen were senselessly murdered by a 19 year old with an AK-15 assault rifle -- the second deadliest shooting at a school in U.S. history. In speaking of Satan -- alternate terms are The Accuser and The Avenger-- Jewish rabbis have taught that this power stirs up the evil impulse in humans and seduces them into sin. 'Sin' is a puny term for the stone cold hatred that took the lives of so many promising young persons and their teachers and staff.

They thought it was a fire drill.

They thought it was a fire drill at first, so the students hurried out of the classroom, and geography teacher Scott Beigel locked the door behind them. Soon, they heard gunshots, and everyone was running back up the stairs, said Kelsey Friend, 16. As they ran, Kelsey was being shoved, and she told Beigel she was scared. The students heard more gunshots, and Beigel quickly unlocked the classroom door so the students could hide. They all covered by his desk, like they had practiced in drills, and Kelsey noticed that her teacher didn't run in behind her. "Mr. Beigel is laying on the floor; he's not moving," her friend told her. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/.../parkland-school-shooting-victims>)

The temptation to break the covenant bond of common humanity... Here we are confronted by the temptation to think that a moment of power with a gun in one's hand is a moment of true power instead of a moment of abject hatred and self hatred.

Perhaps this day we might want to remember that Jesus was also tempted by power. In Matthew we read: *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. And he said to him: "All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me."*

Jesus says *Begone, Satan* in response. In the lonely exile of the wilderness, in a place where hunger, fantastic delusions, powerful inducements assail him, Jesus does

not worship the Accuser. Nor does he succumb to the temptation to literally throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple of Jerusalem itself -- a temptation to self annihilation.

But we cannot leave temptation to Matthew, Mark and Luke. We cannot think that temptation is something that belongs to the pages of scripture and that Jesus' victory over forces of darkness, forces that he will address again and again, solves that particular problem for us.

Rather, as we begin Lent, we must acknowledge that temptations are still powerful and dangerous. They have nothing to do with red meat, or sweet chocolate. Rather they have to do with the health of our inner spirit, our ability to confess our weaknesses and our fears and move on rather than pretend that these things inside of us do not exist. They have to do with our ability to see ourselves in community rather than in isolation and individuality; with our ability to see ourselves humbly connected to one another rather than as pridefully separate. They have to do with remembering instead of abandoning common bonds, common affection, common needs. At Parkland, teachers and staff remembered these common bonds and literally threw themselves in front of kids. They died in hallways and at doorways while others lived.

As we begin our time of Lenten reflection, therefore, let us consider how we might face more stalwart temptations than those of sugar, red meat, chocolate. After Parkland, these temptations seem more compelling:

- ❖ The temptation of silence. April 20th is the 19th anniversary of Columbine. 19 years. Now students are raising their voices, organizing online message boards to make April 20th a national walkout day (See AP and USA Today Feb 17, 2018 releases on walkouts).

- ❖ The temptation of distraction. We want to turn aside. We want to claim that nothing can be done. We yearn for distracting alternatives. But students who survived are asking us to pay attention and join them.
- ❖ The temptation of isolation. We want to pretend that our lives are somehow isolate and preserved. But who we are and what we do and how we respond to evil and oppression and poverty count. I know these temptations deep inside of me, and I suspect that others do as well.

In thinking about the temptation narratives in the Gospel, Anglican bishop and scholar N.T. Wright has written:

There are of course huge problems with fitting such an episode into a historical treatment. The language [of the temptation narratives] is highly charged, the story highly crafted. ... But it must be said emphatically that again and again in a variety of religious traditions ... those who have believed themselves to be under a [religious] vocation ... have constantly described themselves as being engaged in warfare with unseen forces (Wright, Jesus and The Victory of God, 457).

These forces have not gone away. Those of us who claim the Christian faith have been given that religious vocation. We are members of the Body of Christ.

On October 2, 2017, one day following the Las Vegas massacre, sixty Episcopal Bishops United Against Gun Violence (The Rt. Rev. Steven A. Miller of The Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee is an active member) issued a joint statement which included this call for self assessment:

... we must acknowledge that a comprehensive solution to gun violence, whether it comes in the form of mass shootings, street violence, domestic violence or suicide, will not simply be a matter of changing laws, but of changing lives. Our country is feasting on anger that fuels rage, alienation and loneliness. From the White House to the halls of Congress to our own towns and perhaps at our own tables, we nurse grudges and resentments rather than cultivating the respect, concern and affection that each of us owes to the other. The leaders who should be speaking to us of reconciliation and the justice that must precede it too often instead stoke flames of division and mistrust. We

must, as a nation, embrace prayerful resistance before our worse impulses consume us.

We are needed. And we also are summoned: *Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild , restless sea, / day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying "Christian, follow me..."* (Cecil Francis Alexander, 1818-1895).

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