FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Much Longer* Psalm 25:1-10

Mark 1:9-15

On this first Sunday of Lent, it is appropriate that we hear about Jesus’ forty-day sojourn in the wilderness. It is with this understanding of the kinds of cravings and urges to which all humans are attracted that Jesus is prepared for his ministry.

Yet, as is usual with the Gospel of Mark, so much happens in just a few verses that we hardly realize that anything has happened at all. Mark’s reporting is so brief that we almost miss it. There it is in verses 12 and 13, then *whoosh!* and Jesus is off to Galilee to begin his ministry.

It is important to note that Mark connects Jesus’ temptation together with his baptism. It too is only briefly mentioned. However, even though both events are given scant mention, both are important. Indeed, Jesus’ temptation cannot happen for him with any degree of hope for success without his baptism. This is the key to Jesus’ strength to carry out his ministry. It is his foundation—just as baptism is the foundation of all our lives.

To be sure: Jesus’ need of baptism—ie. the washing away of sins—can be a bit confusing when we remember that Jesus was the one person on earth whose heart and spirit was not burdened with sin. There was nothing to wash away. Why then is baptism a part of his story?

Part of the answer lies in the verses we sang of the 25th Psalm. Those of you who followed along in the Bible will have noticed that this is one of the psalms attributed to King David, and it is supposed to be a teaching psalm.

Of the many people of the Bible, David is certainly one who would have been well acquainted with temptation and the need to be released from the guilt of his actions. David would have been intimately familiar with the feelings of shame and the sorrow that accompanies bad decisions—especially decisions made to satisfy reckless, unethical desires.

In one of the stories that we know best about him—ie. his illicit affair with Bathsheba—David’s dishonesty and unethical desires not only lead him to adultery. Covering up his own sin led him to destroy the life of another human being—Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband.

We do not know when (in his lifetime) David was supposed to have composed this psalm, or if he is, indeed, the writer. What we do know, however, is that whoever the writer was, he is well aware of the aftermath-thoughts and recriminations one has after having committed sins against humans and God.

That is why the writer of Psalm 25 continues to sing of God’s mercy and the way in which God has shielded him before, and so he pleadingly writes:

*2do not let me be put to shame;  
   do not let my enemies exult over me.*

and

*6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,  
   for they have been from of old.*

The voice of regret and fear is very real. Yet is also important to note that this psalm is also supposed to be a teaching psalm. Inscribed within the personal trails and desires of the psalmist are also important aspects of knowledge about the character and integrity of God which the psalmist wants to impart to his listeners and readers.

God is one in whom the psalmist has trusted and has found steadfast and committed to the well being of the human creature. The God the psalmist knows is merciful and helpful. Indeed, in verses nine and ten, the psalmist writes that God is his teacher—God is the one who leads him to understanding, and that: *10All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God’s covenant and God’s decrees.*

In telling us about God, the psalmist is also eager to point out to us the particular attributes that human beings must assume or acquire in order for God to act in our lives.

First, the human being must be willing to listen and to learn. We must be humble. Most of us know this: that to be able to learn anything we have to be able to and willing to lower our defenses. We need to put aside all pretense of expertise and allow ourselves to be filled with the instruction of another. Humility. We need to be humble when learning from each other.

We need to be humble before God, too, so that God will not have to batter down the defenses that keep us from receiving life-giving instruction—which are God’s words of love that we need.

These are just some of the things David tells us in this psalm, although as we all know: David did not always follow his own best inclinations.

Jesus, however, will and does. Coming back to his story in the Gospel, we find that Jesus is a walking psalm—a walking song of God. Jesus is God singing to us of what it looks like to be loved by God; what it is like to receive and live with the love of God and so, Jesus comes to us with humility—not as some exalted, earthly celebrity or VIP. Jesus comes to us as one who lives and experiences life in the same circumstances under which most of us live our lives. He is Emmanuel. He is “God with Us.”

Second, and again, in the Gospel of Mark, this happens so fast we hardly take note of it—Jesus is baptized. Once again, Jesus is teaching. He is showing us how human beings are supposed to live, and so he acknowledges our need for God’s mercy by being baptized. Jesus showed us the importance of humility before God even as he showed us his determined unity with human beings.

The most important thing about Jesus’ baptism is something that happens before his forty days in the wilderness. Just as he is coming out of the waters of baptism, Mark tells us that the clouds part above him and the voice of God declares: *11‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*

Let me summarize this for us again: the heavens above Jesus are ripped apart. The voice of God declares that Jesus is God’s son, and that he is pleasing to God. Then, and only then, the Spirit descends and enters into Jesus. Mark says the spirit drives him out into the wilderness.

It is at this point—*after* the Spirit has come down to Jesus—that he is sent out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. I think many of us are tempted (there is that word again!) to think that Jesus goes out there into the wilderness all alone. But that does not make any sense, does it? If Jesus is focused on showing us his unity with us, he would hardly take on the temptations of the world without God’s Spirit to support and strengthen him.

The Spirit — that is the game changer: that Jesus will *not* be out in the wilderness alone and defenseless. He will always be—wherever he is—in the presence of God, and so will we. This is what his sojourn means for each of us—that we are never alone *especially* in those times when we need a strength beyond our own.

As one commentator has written:

*It seems that no resistance of temptation is successful without the presence of God. And therein lies our promise. Not necessarily that we have the power to defend and deflect temptation. Not that we are capable of taking on Satan in the wilderness…Not so much that baptism is our guarantee that will shore up the walls to keep out that which seeks to threaten our belief, our trust,* [or] *our relationship with God.*

What Jesus’ baptism shows us is that the Spirit of God is always going to be with us.

Sometimes, with the Spirit’s help, we will be able to put aside temptation. At other times, we will fail. However, even at that point all is not lost, we are not lost. At that point, we can depend on God’s grace to accept our genuine expressions of repentance, and we can let God help us to begin again. We are never alone to face our temptations. We are never alone when we stumble and make a bad decision. God’s Holy Spirit is always with us.

Here is the thing about having this story of Jesus and the first ten verses of Psalm 25 as the Bible lessons for the first Sunday of Lent: this is the season of the church year that is associated with “giving something up.”

The one thing we need never give up; the one thing we are are called to hold onto is our certainty that God’s love and mercy is always with us. There is no season or moment in our lives when we need to give up this amazing gift of love. God’s love is with us for more than a season, much longer than any one season. Our good news is that God’s faithfulness toward us is always good and true. We need never be without it.

So, what temptations are you facing right now? What brings you sleepless nights, or even a moment of disquiet or anxiety?

On this first Sunday in Lent, hear the good news of Christ: God is with you; God’s Spirit will never leave you to face the distractions and anxieties of life alone. You are stronger than you know because the Spirit is stronger than any of us can imagine.

So, let us go forward into an uncertain future unafraid. God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.