

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

### Mark 1:12-15

Our Scripture passage for this week comes from the Gospel of Mark 1:12- 15. In these verses we read the simple yet meaningful message of Jesus being tempted in the desert. As we begin our Lenten Time of prayer, self-denial (fasting), and good works (almsgiving), this text offers some important insights to direct our spiritual growth during the next forty days.

By going to the desert to be tested for forty days, Jesus is participating in a well-established tradition of Israelite history. The Hebrew people themselves were tested in the desert for forty years and it was through that experience that they learned fidelity, trust, and how to live as a people who have a covenant relationship with God. However, the Exodus in the desert was not an idyllic experience for the Hebrew people. It was also a place where they manifested periods of rebellion, idolatry, and disobedience. Moses went to the desert and fasted for forty days on Mount Sinai (Dt 9:18). Elijah also fasted for forty days near Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8). The testing that Jesus experienced in the desert was a test of character. He had to demonstrate His resolute preparedness to be the Anointed Son of God and carry out the Good News of God's presence in the world. Thus, the desert (or wilderness) is the place where prophets prepare for their mission (testing), where the people learn to overcome their rebellious tendencies and where God's love is renewed through revelation and covenant relationship. By triumphing over Satan's testing, Jesus shows that He is the Just One who remains faithful rather than the one who gives in to sin and rebellion in the face of trial or temptation (see Wis 2:12-20, 5:1-23). The fundamental temptation of the Old Testament is commonly presented as lack of trust in the Word of God. We see this fundamental temptation surfacing in the original sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis and in the Israelites wandering in the desert when they thought that God had led them there to die. By going to the desert immediately after His Baptism, Jesus is teaching us that as Christian disciples we are to prepare ourselves by turning towards God, trusting God's Word, and finding our security in our fidelity to the Lord rather than in our earthly success. For all disciples, when we turn "towards" the Lord, then we must inevitably turn "away" from sin and all other influences that would lead us away from God. The desert is the place where God reveals Himself, tests His servants to strengthen them, and manifests His providence and love; the desert is also a place of vulnerability and aloneness.

1. *How have you experienced these dimensions of the "desert" in your life?*
2. *What growth in discipleship do you want to occur in your life during these Forty Days of Lent?*
3. *When is your character as a disciple tested?*
4. *From what is God asking you to turn away in your life so you can grow closer to the Lord?*
5. *What practices help make Lent a fruitful, spiritual time in your life?*
6. *How can you create a "desert" in your life during these forty days of Lent?*
7. *The number "forty" is symbolic more than chronological and it means a time of preparation and learning. Sometimes God leaves us in the "desert" as long as it takes for us to learn the lesson the Lord knows we need. When have you felt like*

*God has left you in a desert, and what was the lesson the Lord wanted you to learn?*

- 8. Jesus had to be "driven" into the desert. When have you felt God led you to a situation you did not want to face and why?*

One of the distinctive elements of Mark's Gospel is that he tells us the interesting fact that Jesus was among the wild beasts and that angels ministered to Him. This information is very important for our understanding of this passage. These details also emerge in various parts of the Old Testament. Psalm 91:11-13 connects care by the angels with safety among beasts. In Genesis 1:28 and 2:19-20 it states that there was an original peaceful coexistence with the various animals. Elijah is said to have received the ministry of angels. Even Daniel in the lion's den relates the story of some- one who coexisted among wild beasts and was ministered to by angels (Dn 6:22-23). These passages speak not only of God's care for His chosen ones but also of God's intentionality for creation. Although the original peaceful coexistence was destroyed by sin, Jesus shows us through His obedience in the desert that He is able to restore what was lost and to bring about a new creation, a new beginning for humanity. Mark's Gospel will reiterate this hope of a new creation in 13:24-27. Thus, Jesus' obedience is able to overcome the disobedience of Adam and Eve and to once again establish right relationship with humanity. Saint Paul will use this contrast between the disobedience of Adam and the obedience of Jesus in His own writings to show how we receive this new life through Jesus. The Prophet Isaiah intensified the hope of a new creation when he wrote of how the wilderness will be transformed into paradise (see Is 11:6-9, 32:14-20, 65:25). Jesus will manifest His ultimate obedience to the Word of God on the cross of Calvary. In this great sacrifice, He will definitively accomplish the work of our redemption and offer healing to a wounded world. As our Lord carries out His ministry leading to Calvary however, He will encounter many people who will challenge Him and many people who will help Him. Those who challenge and help are sometimes interpreted as the ongoing presence of wild beasts (those who oppose) and angels (those who help through their ministry as in the example of Simon Peter's mother-in-law). So the message for us is to persevere and to help one another persevere in fidelity, obedience, and victory as we follow the Lord.

- 1. What strikes you most about this passage and why? What does it mean to you that Jesus overcame the disobedience (fundamental sin) of Genesis and how do we as disciples share in the Lord's victory of obedience?*
- 2. It is no accident that Jesus experienced temptation/testing immediately after being identified as the "Beloved Son" of the Father in Mark 1:11. What are the ways today in which people are tempted to not fulfill their roles (father/mother, son/daughter, husband/wife, business leader, or Christian)? Who are the "wild beasts" that try to deter Christian disciples from being faithful?*
- 3. Who are the "angels" that help Christian disciples persevere infidelity, obedience, and victory?*
- 4. When is it difficult to tell the difference between those who are the beasts and those who are the angels?*
- 5. What practices or tools help you remain faithful when you are being tested in your*

*discipleship?*

6. *How would your life look if God restored it to the way He intended, before sin?*
7. *How can this Lenten Time be an opportunity for you to enter more deeply into the redeeming grace of Jesus?*

Lastly, this Sunday is a good opportunity to reflect on the three primary spiritual practices associated with the Time of Lent: prayer, self-denial, and works of charity. While these practices are always to be essential components of a disciple's life, the forty days of Lent are a time when we are asked to intensify them so as to become more faithful to God's Word as did Jesus in the desert. Deepened prayer helps us to hear the Word of God more clearly and to become more responsive in following the Lord's will in our lives. Prayer also increases our love of God by deepening our relationship with the Lord. Self-denial frees us from being enslaved by our appetites or dominated by wasteful practices. Self-denial, especially fasting, also awakens us to the needs and sufferings of others and allows us to experience the frailty of the human condition so as to grow in compassion for those who live in constant need. In performing charitable works (almsgiving), we express our love of God in our love of neighbor and begin to make a practical difference in the lives of others as a witness of our discipleship. Charitable works (almsgiving) also challenge us to let go of the false security of our possessions and the illusion of self-sufficiency by our responsible care for others. Thus, these three practices are interconnected: prayer, self-denial, and good works all lead us into a practical and more profound love of God and neighbor. Lent is not so much about what we "give up"; but rather what we "give to" God and others. Thus, each of these three practices (prayer, fasting, and almsgiving) is meant to deepen and sanctify our relationship with God, relationship with self, and relationship with others.

1. *How can you deepen your prayer life during these forty days of Lent so you can hear the Word of God more clearly as it is being spoken to you?*
2. *What are some of the enslavements you experience, and how can the practice of self-denial help free you from being governed by those enslavements? ("Do you control your desires or do your desires control you?")*
3. *Who needs to experience your mercy and charitable works, and how can you express your love of neighbor in a practical way during this Lenten Time?*