

GENESIS 9:8-17 (p. 6)

FEBRUARY 21, 2021

MARK 1:9-15 (p. 812)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Engage our minds Lord, with the wonder of your Word! Quicken our spirits with your own Spirit, so that we might truly come alive! And move us, please, into action in your Name! For we are your people, those who meet in the Shadow of the Cross! Amen!

“HOW WILL YOU ANSWER?”

My daughter, son-in-law, and grandkids live on the Texas/Mexico border. And the winter storms this past week left them without power and heat for days! They are pretty creative though. So, for Family Night, they jumped in the minivan, cranked up the heat, covered themselves with blankets, and then, sat in the driveway and watched movies together!

I love movies, don't you! I especially love watching them with my grandkids cuddled up on my lap! And one of their favorites, is the neo-classic “The Lion King”. Maybe you've seen it? There is a struggle that takes place in the plot between good and evil. It plays out in the life of a young lion named Simba. His father, Mustafa, is the current King of the Lion Pride. And Simba, as heir-apparent, goes through a series of trials and tribulations, discovering his true purpose in life!

In one particular scene, Simba is talking with his jealous Uncle Scar. The young cub is excited about someday becoming king. And unaware of Scar's desire to usurp the throne, Simba boasts, “Hey, Uncle Scar. Guess what! I'm going to be King of Pride Rock some day!” “Oh, goodie,” says Scar.

“My dad just showed me the whole kingdom,” Simba continues, “and I’m going to rule it all.” “So, your father showed you the whole kingdom, did he?” Scar then motions to a shadowy land on the horizon, and says, “He didn’t show you what’s beyond that rise on the northern border, did he?” “Well, no,” Simba admits. “He said I can’t go there.” “And he’s absolutely right,” Scar continues. “It’s too dangerous. Only the bravest lions go there.” “Well, I’m brave,” little Simba responds. “What’s out there?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Simba,” says Uncle Scar. “I just can’t tell you. I’m only looking out for the well-being of my favorite nephew. An Elephant Graveyard is no place for a young Prince. Promise me you’ll never visit that dreadful place.”

Scar, of course, feigns innocence at divulging the location of the forbidden territory. He apologizes even—but knows that he has succeeded in awakening Simba’s will to disobey his father. As the young cub leaves his uncle, he seeks out his playmate, Nala, with whom he goes to explore the banned Elephant Graveyard. And there, surprised by evil hyenas, they barely escape with their lives!

Temptation! It’s pretty common, right? And it comes in all shapes and sizes! Pride is a “biggie”! It’s what Scar uses to hook Simba into disobeying his father and going to a dangerous place! “Only brave lions should go to the Elephant Graveyard.” “You may be the King someday, but not of that particular place. You can’t be King of a place you’ve never been!” No! Pride is definitely a “biggie”! Did God really say you can’t eat from that particular tree? You know, if you do, you’ll become like God!

Pride is an easy trap to fall into! But then, so is Insecurity! And when you stop and think about it, Insecurity is still a form of Pride! An excessive focus on “Self”! Scar is just thinking about himself. He wants the young cub to perish, so that he can become King. But Simba, still in the process of developing his own character at this stage, is pretty self-focused too! Pride, both ends, Arrogance and Insecurity, are useful tools of the enemy!

Jesus is in the Wilderness, in our Gospel lesson this morning. Mark doesn’t go into much detail with the encounter. He simply says, “the Spirit sent Him out into the Wilderness” immediately following His Baptism—that He was there “forty days, being tempted by Satan”—that He “was with wild animals”, and “angels attended Him”! Matthew and Luke give us far more facts, so I am going to borrow from them a bit today. But for just a moment, zero-in on what Mark has to say. “Jesus was in the Wilderness, with the Holy Spirit and Satan—with Angels and Wild Beasts!” So, when would you say you’re most tempted to sin? Where are you when it happens? And who is with you?

Would you say you’re more tempted when you are in a Desert Place? Or that it’s easier to be tempted when you’re there? Surrounded by Wild Beasts maybe, or other Wild Beasts? Is it in the Wilderness, when you’re down and out? Or is it when things are going well, when you feel safe and secure? Are you tempted most when surrounded by those who love you, and everything is clicking along just fine? When does temptation come slithering in for you? That’s important to know! Do emotions come into play? Are you susceptible to things like Pride, like Scar and Simba? Or are your “hot buttons” something else entirely?

I'm asking, because temptation is universal! We all have to deal with it at some point, in one way or another! So, knowing how, and when, it usually manifests, as well as when you are most likely to succumb to it, can really help! Just realizing that it is universal will help! I mean, Jesus was tempted, right? Temptation then, in and of itself can't be wrong! Being tempted is not a sin! Write that down somewhere, and keep it handy. I'd say stick it in your Bible, but that will only work if you open it from time-to-time! Temptation is not a sin! How we respond to it though, how you answer that siren song, just might be!

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. This season started on Wednesday with a simple Service of Ashes, one designed to highlight our sinfulness and mortality. "From dust you have been made. And to dust you will one day return"? "Repent and believe the Gospel!"

This whole forty-day period is an intentional time of self-reflection, of taking an honest look at ourselves, and then adjusting accordingly! Our journey is reminiscent of Jesus' forty-days in the Wilderness, a time of trial and testing and temptation! But it leads to the Glorious Good News of Easter Morning! We hear even now, off in the distance, the Echo of God's Grace! There is hope for the hopeless! We know of our Lord's Steadfast Love!

Good News doesn't really have much value though, if you don't first comprehend the Bad News! Light doesn't mean much, until you are surrounded by darkness! Salvation then, this loving invitation to stand boldly in the Presence of a Holy God, has no meaning what-so-ever, unless you first realize your current condition, and where that leads!

Calvin describes it as a movement from “Guilt, to Grace, and then to Gratitude”! God’s Grace is amazing! A wonderful Gift, we’re told in Scripture, one that we cannot earn! And our response to that Gift should be Gratitude, all that we do for the Lord and for others from the moment we realize that truth! Only, all of that has no meaning at all, no depth, no purpose really, if you don’t first acknowledge your Guilt!

Lent is an intentional time to do that. Between now and Easter, we are going to look at the very real presence of Sin in our lives, and in our hearts. And we’re going to start by looking at the One who successfully navigated that Valley of the Shadow.

Mark tells us that Jesus was “sent” by the Spirit into the Wilderness. Matthew and Luke, at least in the New International Version, say that He was “led” by the Spirit. Some translations say that He was “driven” by the Spirit, into the Desert, to be Tempted by the devil! And there, Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights! Then, when He is good and hungry, the tempter comes to Him and says, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread!”

The devil then took Him to the highest point on the Temple roof and said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. The angels will protect you!” Then, the devil took Jesus up to the top of a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, where he said, “All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me!” You remember the encounter, right? Again, if you like details, check out Matthew and Luke.

Now Jesus, of course, counters each of the devil's attacks with Scripture! He has His priorities straight! "Man does not live by bread alone," He says "but by the Word of God. He could have added Matthew 6: "don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, life is more than food! Your Father in Heaven knows what you need! So, focus instead on your relationship with Him"!

Jesus obviously knows the Word quite well! He put on the full Armor of God, you might say, described in Ephesians 6: The Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, and Feet Fitted with the Gospel of Peace! Jesus also held the Shield of Faith, and wore the Helmet of Salvation. But here, He wields the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, and wields it quite well! That's worth noting! Be prepared, be ready, so that "when" temptation strikes, and it will, you can answer it with the Word of God!

Jesus in the Wilderness, hungry and alone! He is in the middle of nowhere, and has been for quite a while now, almost a month and a half! He is uncomfortable, hot and dirty, and probably thirsty beyond what any of us have ever experienced! I spent one day in the Desert by the Dead Sea, with plenty of water, and I literally thought I was going to die! Jesus has been there forty days and nights, fasting, so He is pretty darned hungry too!

By now his physical strength would have been almost gone. Imagine how weak you would feel after six weeks without food. He is vulnerable at this point. His defenses are down. He is in a physically compromised state! When suddenly, as if out of the blue, temptation comes thundering in! Believe me, the Enemy knows when to attack!

You're hungry, right? Well Jesus, how about turning these stones into bread! That's often how temptation assails, when you're vulnerable or down. But not always. Sometimes it's when things are going along just fine that we are tempted! Adam and Eve were in the Garden, right, surrounded by all kinds of good things—trees and plants that were “pleasing to the eye, and good for food”. There was even a river that flowed through the entire place watering everything for them! They were comfortable and happy, well-fed and totally at peace! They had absolutely everything they could ever need! But Satan, in the midst of all that, offered them an apple! And convinced them that it was something they just had to have!

David was a King, remember, one of the great biblical heroes of all time! Things were good for him too! He had helped unite the Northern and Southern Kingdoms! He had vanquished all of his enemies, including a giant named Goliath! He had everything he could possibly want! The economy was going great! The wars were going well! And the people of his nation loved him! Things couldn't have been better! But then Satan pointed out Bathsheba.

“Hey David, you deserve her you know. Just look at how pleasing she is to the eye. You're the king David. You can take what you want. Think about how much good you've done! Consider this as a reward! Think about all the comfort a relationship with Bathsheba would give you. It might even make you more compassionate yourself, more than you already are!”

“Go for it, David! Enjoy the moment! Don’t think about the fact that its adultery. Don’t worry that you need to plan an intricate murder plot in order to get rid of her husband! Don’t consider all of the people around you that’ll get hurt. Or the distance this sin will place between you and your God! Just think of yourself David!” Focus on yourself!

You know I have a pretty simple definition for Sin. Many of you have heard it. Sin is anything that separates you from God! Anything! Maybe I need to expand it though? Maybe Sin actually includes anything that separates you from others as well?

Let’s face it, temptation can surface at good times or bad! But it is surprising, isn’t it, how often it comes along expected lines? And one common avenue is our appetites! When Jesus was hungry, the tempter said, “Turn these stones into bread.” And Eve, through devious speech, was caused to discover that the tree was not only “good for food,” but also “pleasing to the eye.” David saw Bathsheba bathing. The serpent is crafty. He will use our God-given desires against us!

Doubt is another powerful weapon in the enemy’s arsenal! Satan even tried that one on Jesus. “If you are really the Son of God, then throw yourself down from the top of this Temple. You won’t get hurt. Not if you are really the Son of God.” Doubt is a powerful tool of the enemy, which is why we need to hang onto Faith! Sometimes it’s general doubt. “Hey, you are hungry, aren’t you? Why not turn these stones into bread? What could be wrong with that?”

And sometimes it's self-doubt. "If you really are the Son of God... If you really are who you say you are... If you belong, or believe, or care about what you claim, then..."

At other times though, Satan will even use doubt in God! "Didn't God say He would command His angels concerning you? Then go ahead and throw yourself down? Did He really say, Eve, that you shouldn't eat from that particular tree? Are you positive that command pertains to you?" Have you been there?

And in addition to appetites, and desires, and doubts, the tempter does often freely wield "arrogance" as well! "David, you're the king, you deserve a beautiful woman". "Eve, God loves you. Wouldn't He want you to be happy, to enjoy that amazing apple". "Jesus, you're the Son of God, shouldn't all the kingdoms of the earth belong to you"? You deserve that new outfit, or that new toy. Just put it on the credit card. You are special and you should be treated accordingly! Don't stoop down and do something for someone else! You're above that! You have worked hard all week. You don't really need to get up and go to Worship! Just grab a cup of coffee and spend a little extra time reading your Bible instead. Temptation is often subtle!

By far, though, the most pervasive form of temptation that slithers in, is the temptation to do something "good", but at the expense of doing the "best". That's a "biggie" for Believers, a well-baited trap. Many years ago, that truth came screaming at me out of this text! And I have never been able to read it any other way since!

I mean, what could possibly be better than Jesus turning stones into bread? With all of the starving people in the world, with such a shortage of arable land, with wheat blights and dying honey bees, and the world's population exploding at the seams, what could possibly be better than a super abundance of food? Do you know how many stones there are just lying around in the world? Why not have Jesus zap them all into bread!

Or if you were trying to convince people that Jesus is the Messiah, what would carry more convincing proof than angels cradling His body, lifting Him up and gently settling Him onto the ground, after He tossed Himself off of the Temple roof? And what better location could there possibly be for such a commanding demonstration of power and authority than where Satan has already brought Him, the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem? Can you think of a better evangelistic tool? If someone saw something like that, would they have any more doubts that He is the Son of God?

And no matter where you are politically, I'm sure, as a Christian you'd agree that having Jesus in charge of all the kingdoms of the world would be a pretty good thing! Imagine! No more fighting or war! No more killing! No more dictators, or power struggles, or evil governments! No more elections or election advertising! No more government waste! No more National Debt! Think about it! Jesus in charge of everything! Talk about the Kingdom of God here on earth! I would jump at the chance, wouldn't you?

That's a huge Temptation, isn't it—to do the “good”, but at the expense of the “best”? Steven Covey in his “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” might call it doing the “urgent” instead of the “important”! For Jesus, saying “yes” to the good—turning stones into bread, creating a dramatic show of power, ruling all of the kingdoms of the world—would have benefitted all kinds of people! But it would have done so, at the expense of the “best”! It would have detoured Him from His God-given mission!

Saying “yes” to Satan's temptations would have led Jesus down an entirely different path, one that would have indeed changed the course of the world! Whereas saying “no”, brought Him to the Cross, and opened up a path to Salvation for you and me! It changed the world to come, for those who choose to believe!

Lent can be a tough time. Who wants to talk about Sin? Lent deals with reality, though. It causes us to be aware of our need for Forgiveness and Grace, at least if we are honest with ourselves.

We start our Journey in the Wilderness! We then approach the Empty Tomb through the bittersweet “Goodbye” of Maundy Thursday! And the betrayal, and denial, and darkness of Good Friday! We do it with our eyes wide-open to our role in the drama, our own personal role! It's not easy! But even here, in the Valley of the Shadow, we hear the Triumph of that Glorious Dawn on Easter Morning, echoing in the distance! We know to whom we belong! We are aware of our Lord's Steadfast Love! And therefore, all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and Loving God, we gather now in your Name. We come together as you have created us to be, in a Fellowship of Love. We have assembled as a Community Lord, as One Body, as a powerful force for your Glory. And for this privilege, and your Grace within it, we give you our heartfelt thanks.

Father, we have walked through the week that you have just given us, and are about to walk through several more. We ask you for strength as we do, for the ability to rise again when we stumble, and the opportunity for rest when we need it. We also ask for the wisdom to discern between these things, because we are so often focused only on ourselves. Help us to finish the race that you have called us to run, and to glorify you with each step that we take.

Lord, we sometimes find ourselves lonely on our journey, or sometimes even quite lost. We are tempted to stray as we travel, and to sometimes detour right away. Please take our hands at these moments, and help us to feel your Presence, your strength and support. Steady us Lord, and point us again in the right direction. And Lord, if you will, make us signposts that others might follow. Use us Lord, the men and women of Blaine Christian Church as powerful and mightily witnesses to you! And make us instruments that help usher in your Kingdom here on earth.

Most Holy God, as we walk your paths, today and always, help us to help others along the way. Help us to see those who are lost and to speak a word of direction and encouragement. Help us to lift them up before you in our daily prayers, asking for healing and guidance and peace on their lives. We pray today for..... We entrust these loved ones into your care Lord, as we pray now the way that Jesus taught us, saying...