

Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is startlingly brief. It is all of two verses long. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, the Spirit descends like a dove, and then that same Spirit drives him into the wilderness. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not tell us exactly what the temptation of Jesus looked like. We aren't told what convincing arguments Satan gave, nor are we told how Jesus responded to those arguments.

But, none of this is surprising when we consider how brief and straight-to-the-point Mark is all throughout the book. The Gospel of Mark is known for including few details, Mark's frequent usage of the word "immediately," and for being action-packed and non-stop. Jesus is tempted for forty days in the wilderness, but Mark doesn't give us much insight into what those forty days looked like.

The only details we are given are the location – the wilderness; the duration – forty days; who was there – Jesus, Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels. But this story is so important to the journey Jesus made during his earthly ministry, that Mark places it right near the very beginning of the book. Jesus' earthly ministry kicks off immediately after his baptism and temptation.

Even though the details are sparse, there is so much that could be said about this passage, and even more questions that could be asked. Does the presence of the wild beasts with Jesus remind us of the Garden of Eden and Jesus as the second Adam? What temptations did Jesus face? When the angels waited on Jesus, what did that look like? Why would the Spirit that had descended on Jesus during his baptism drive him out to be tempted? Some of these questions and wonderings are addressed with more detail in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and some are not. But the main question that stands out to me in this passage is: why did Jesus need to be tempted at all?

The main reason I've heard given for the temptation of Jesus is to remind us that Jesus was tempted just like we are. And Mark's sparse details help us to make this connection even more strongly. As we read, we cannot dwell on the specific temptations, but we see that Jesus was tempted just as we have been tempted. When we go through struggles and difficulties and temptations, we know that Jesus endured the same.

The account of the Baptism and Temptation in Mark are very brief and vivid. Bishop Christopher Herbert, the former Bishop of St Albans and Archdeacon of Dorking once wrote:

“At what speed did Mark write? He gives the impression of pressing on: it’s all urgent. He is fond of phrases such as “and immediately”. But, on second reading, it all seems much more careful. Take the phrase “Now after John was arrested” – it could not be more brief. We have been given no warning that John the Baptist is under threat, but perhaps the original readers would already know the background to the arrest. Mark uses a special word for what has been translated into English as “arrested”, which comes from the Greek word *paradidomi* – to hand over. Mark later uses this word about Jesus himself; he was “handed over” to the chief priests and scribes and Jesus predicts that the disciples themselves will be “handed over” to the councils and synagogues.

There are times for each of us, perhaps in illness, accident or tragedy when we are no longer in control, when we are, as it were, “handed over- in the grip of forces that are beyond our control, and possibly our understanding. Yet, inside our own experience of being handed over, we may discover the presence of Christ- who stays with us and who shares totally in our helplessness. And, out of that, by God’s grace, new possibilities and new life emerge.”

And so it is with our Lenten pilgrimage. We begin in the wilderness with Jesus being tempted, as we are. We then move on through the reconstruction Sunday by Sunday through Lent of his major preaching, teaching and miracles. We will be invited to reflect on our lives and attitudes towards our faith and the quality of our lives.

After the temptation, Jesus went into Galilee. He called disciples to follow him, and he began to cast out demons and bring healing to those who were in need of it. As we walk our Lenten pilgrimage wherever our steps may lead us, may we be assured that we are not alone. We are following in the footsteps of one who can sympathize with us in our weaknesses. We follow one who suffered unjustly, and we follow in his footsteps as he worked to bring healing and compassion to those who needed it most. May God bring us out of our comfort zone and keep us in the power of the Holy Spirit to seek out those, like us, who need the healing and redeeming love of God.

Amen.