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Mark 1:12-15

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM JUST ONE VERSE?

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Do you ever sit down and read the obituaries in the morning? I don't mean looking for someone that you know: a relative, a neighbor, a former classmate. I mean just sitting down and reading about someone that you don't know or have ever heard of before. You probably don't. I do so every so often. I do it to remind myself that every person is a precious soul for whom Christ died and that every person has a story to tell.

Most obituaries are pretty short since the families have to pay to run them. So much of a person's life is condensed into a single sentence or two. Think about that! Does it intrigue you to hear things like "he spent the years 1942-1945 serving the United States Navy in the Pacific Theater of Operations" or "he spent forty years working downtown at the J. L. Hudson Building" or "she was the mother of twelve children." I'm guessing that there are a lot of stories that a single line like that can tell.

Every Sunday in the Creed we speak one line that simply says, "He was crucified, died, and was buried." How many Lenten sermons can we get out of that single line? I know that I've been preaching for 39 years and I haven't even touched the surface of what gems can be mined from that phrase. It is the very heart of the Gospel. Similarly, St. Mark is going to tell us about something just as important to our salvation. It was about Jesus being the perfect Son of God who resisted all of Satan's temptations for us. It is going to cover only a single verse in his Gospel, but it tells us so much. This morning we ask WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM JUST ONE VERSE?

What do you think of when you hear the word "Lent?" I think that most of us think of Jesus' suffering and death, and we would be correct in that. Every Wednesday we read the Passion History that takes us from the Upper Room to Gethsemane to the Sanhedrin to Pilate's Palace to the Way of Sorrows to the hill called Calvary. We see our Lord Jesus suffering physical, emotional, and mental agony. He has the burden of the sin and guilt of the entire world placed upon him. He is going to drink the cup of God's wrath upon sin. And he will stay on the cross, forsaken by his heavenly Father, until every sin committed by every last sinner is paid for in full. On Good Friday, he will exclaim, "It is finished!" bow his head, and voluntarily give up his life.

Jesus was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of not just some, not just many, but the sin of the world. One thing that we know about Old Testament sacrifices is that they had to be perfect. They had to be free of any kind of blemish or defect. If Jesus would take away the sin of the world, he had to be perfect. He could not sin even once in his life. He had to resist every temptation of Satan.

St. Mark simply records: "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan." On the first Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord, we always go to the Jordan river where Jesus is baptized by John. He is the divine Substitute. Even though he has no sin in him, he stands in solidarity with and in the place of sinners. This is a good thing. This is the very purpose for which he left the glories of heaven and came into this world. We know that he had the approval of the Father who exclaimed, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!" The Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove and remained on him.

Now the same Holy Spirit would lead Jesus into the desert. The next phase of God's plan of salvation would be carried out. The spiritual dove of peace that landed on Jesus at his baptism now becomes the spiritual hawk of war as he sends Jesus into combat with the devil. Jesus would go to war with Satan. To be sure, Satan's temptations would come to Jesus throughout his life, but never would they be as intense as during this forty-day period. If he had succumbed to Satan even once, he could not have been the Sacrifice that would take away the sin of the world. For us to live, for us to be reconciled to God, Jesus would have to succeed in turning back every single temptation.

We say that Jesus was the second Adam. Where the first Adam failed, Jesus would have to succeed. What a stark contrast we have here! Adam was tempted in a paradise garden, full of food. Jesus would face his temptation in a bleak wilderness. Where the nation of Israel would wander in the desert as punishment for their constant rebellion, Jesus would willingly remain, gladly doing his Father's will.

If I said that the United States fought the Axis powers for four years in World War II, I could not do that conflict justice. It's the same here. There is no way that simply saying that Jesus was in the desert forty days being tempted by Satan could do this justice. This was the ultimate war, the ultimate conflict. We know that Satan plays by his own rules. He does not fight fair. He fights dirty. He would do everything and anything to make the Son of God fall just as he had made the first Adam fall.

In the Garden of Eden, Satan led Adam and Eve to question both God's truthfulness and his love. He would do the same here. The first thing he would do is to question whether Jesus really was God's beloved Son. It surely didn't look that way, did it? What would we expect of the Son of God? Would we not expect that a king would be basking in glory? He would have the world at its fingertips. He would say, "Jump!" and thousands of servants would say, "How high, sir!" He would have riches so plentiful that they couldn't be counted. Jesus didn't even have any food at his disposal. He was out there in the wilderness. He hadn't eaten for forty days. Does that sound like he was the beloved Son of God? Wouldn't a nice hot piece of bread taste good right about now? If God the Father wasn't going to provide it, why not simply turn a stone into a loaf of bread?

And if Jesus would dodge that one by trusting his Father to provide for him and protect him, why not show the ultimate confidence in the Father? Why not throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple? Wouldn't God's angels protect his beloved Son? Of course, they would! Do you see how Satan would go from one end of the spectrum to the other? He went from having no trust to having a false trust.

The third temptation would be the most insidious of all. He simply suggested that Jesus would skip the journey to Calvary. Have glory without suffering! Live the life of a king that you truly deserve. Why should you suffer and die for a people who really don't care? Why should you suffer and die for people who are really happy to see you suffer and die? Why should you suffer and die for the very people assembled here in church this morning, let alone the people who are too disinterested or lazy to even get out of bed? Go the way of the cross? Are you crazy? These people aren't worth it.

Temptations are not easy to resist. We know that, don't we? It isn't that difficult for us to think of many times in our lives when Satan got the better of us and led us into sin. We are so ashamed of many of those times that we don't want anyone close to know what we were thinking or saying or doing. We don't want our parents to know. We don't want our spouse to know. We don't want our children to know. We don't want our friends to know. We don't even want people that we don't know to know.

St. Mark tells us one detail that the other evangelists don't. He tells us that Jesus was with the wild animals. Wild animals become very desperate as they search for food. One can think of some pretty scary scenarios of being alone with a pack of wolves howling in the not too distant distance. You're not quite sure how close they are to you. You don't want to be anywhere near them as they approach, looking for food. We also know why wild animals became wild. It was because the first Adam sinned and lost his perfection. The world lost its perfection as well.

In order to restore things to what they had been and to what they would again become, Jesus would have to resist those temptations. I'll ask you a question. What are the most difficult temptations to resist? Are they with your friends? Someone tells you to do something. You don't want to do it because you know that it is wrong. You try to resist. Someone says, "What's the matter? Afraid that Mommy will find out? You don't want to be like everybody else? Are you chicken?" That one certainly works, doesn't it? Gangs intimidate potential members into stealing, robbing, and all kinds of violence. I'm sure that you can think of a few times in your life when you did the wrong thing and followed the crowd.

Perhaps temptations are even worse when we are alone. Satan simply makes a suggestion. It sounds so stupid at first. Why would we want to do such a thing? It makes no sense at all. He keeps coming back at us and all of a sudden it starts sounding better. It finally becomes an obsession that we don't want to resist.

We are all alone. Who would ever know? We have no plans to cheat on our spouse while we're home. But then there's that business trip. We just went out for a drink. We're just killing a little time. That girl at the end of the bar is pretty. She's flirting a little and it's fun to flirt back. You're a thousand miles from home. It's just one night and who would ever know? You aren't going to look at pornography with your children in the room. But what if you are all by yourself? You can get it in your hotel room. There's nothing on the regular television anyway. What about that person that you really don't like at work? Why not have a little fun and make up some ridiculous rumor? If that person is hurt, she deserves it anyway. They'll never trace it back to you.

I don't believe that anyone has set their life goals to become alcoholics, drug abusers, wife beaters, child molesters, thieves, murderers, or prostitutes. It happens. Somewhere Satan planted those seeds and he saw them come to fruition. And he laughs his head off!

Jesus came to forgive us from all the times when we fell into temptation. He came to lay down his perfect life to pay for all our transgressions and he came to give us his perfection in return. He was in the desert, resisting every temptation of Satan. Satan would return, and Jesus would continue to resist. This was war and Jesus was the victor. He gives us his victory as well. One little verse tells us so much. Remember it well! AMEN.