

“He Came” Mark 1: 9-15

Around the 1600's many churches had a chair that sat near the front of the sanctuary. It was known as the stool of repentance. If you had committed some sort of sin in that week, you would be brought into the church to sit on the stool.

You would sit there during the whole service. After the sermon was over - - which in itself lasted an hour or more (so no complaining about the length of my sermons!), you had your chance to clear your name for the transgression you had committed. You were to let the church members know how sorry you were.

After you finished pleading your case, the congregation would take a vote deciding if you were sincere or not. If you were judged to be truly sorry, you were welcomed back into the church.

Would it not be interesting today if we had such a stool down front in the sanctuary at South Plains Presbyterian Church? Who do you think would be the first occupant? And I am really surprised there was only one stool!

We talk about sin in all kinds of ways. Many times we think of it as something promiscuous or dirty. It is something that is immoral. It is beyond our wildest imaginations sometimes. But it is always about the darker side of life versus the brighter side of life. It is something bad or evil or sinister.

And I could agree with all of these definitions of sin. However, the Bible has a different definition of sin. The word 'sin' in scripture literally means "missing the mark." Best analogy might be that you are shooting a bow and arrow at a target. You aim for the bullseye and miss it. You try and try again. And until you have hit the bullseye, you have missed the mark!

I think the analogy is rather helpful. It is helpful because it broadens beyond the darker side of life what sin is all about. It means that sin is not defined by what we call moral or right. Sin is not defined by our societal norms or cultural standards. Instead sin occurs anytime we "miss the mark."

One of the things I would declare in my first pastorate that irked people big time was a phrase I would use, "in your very best action or deed you perform, there is a taint of sin." People would argue with me day in and day out about that declaration.

The other declaration they really were irritated with was that I would say when a baby would cry for food because they were hungry, I said that evidence of sin. Because the child was only interested in self, getting fed, being hungry.

So, don't get too put out with me, but we Presbyterians have a high respect for the fact that sin is everywhere. And anytime we begin to think too highly of ourselves, or are overly confident about our abilities or think we have got it all in order, sin is at our door step. Because we have 'missed the mark!'

Which brings me to our scripture for today: the baptism and temptations of Jesus. And I have had an insight about baptism I want to try out on you. It is rather radical and something I have never considered: to be baptized as a Christian (adult or child) is a dangerous possibility for the person being baptized. Let me repeat: parents bringing their child to be baptized or adults desiring to be baptized are entering into some dangerous territory for their lives.

OK, hold on for me to make my point. The story today is about the baptism and temptation of Jesus. We have covered his baptism in a previous sermon. In chapter 1 of Mark, we see Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John. The baptism occurred and the voice from heaven declared "you are my Son, the Beloved."

Jesus was marked. He was labelled. He was identified as the Son of God. He was God's only begotten Son. Baptism does that. Part of the reason we ask for the full name of the child is so we mark that specific child for God's Spirit to fill. It is not to be confused with anyone else. It is not for the masses. It is individualized, personal, and only for that child.

In the baptism, the person is now claimed by God. The person belongs to God, not to their biological family. The person has another parent who has the priority over them. The person is no longer his own person. But now is a child of God...not a child of the Browns or Smiths or Jones

So to bring your child for baptism is to give up your child. He or she has a new identity and a new life. Even as an infant, they are not sure what is happening to their head, but you as a parent have turned your child over to God.

And then look what happens:

“the Spirit immediately drove him
into the wilderness....”

Now that is a benefit if I ever saw one: being driven into the wilderness for the purpose of being tested. Who would not sign up

for that job! And yet that is what occurs to us. We are baptized and temptation begins.

Let's talk about temptation. I'm not talking about temptation of rich foods, chocolate cakes, alcoholic beverages, or incredible buffets. I'm not talking about what you might be giving up for Lent. No, I'm really talking about being tested which is a better translation for temptation.

We are being tested in the wilderness by Satan. All of which is really a foreign concept to us city and civilized folks. But the meaning behind the words is real. Jesus was thrown into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Another way to put it is that Jesus was in a setting that is completely foreign to all God stood for, believed in, or supported.

The setting of the wilderness is the notion of wild, without order, no norms or standards. It is all free-wheeling and ungodly. And for 40 days, Jesus was tested. Temptation is the result of baptism.

Baptism begets testing! For everything the baptism means and stands for is in sharp contrast and contradiction to the rest of the world. Baptism starts our life in the testing mode. We are constantly being tested as to whether we will claim our baptism and what it means OR will we go over to the other side and claim that way of life.

Baptism is dangerous.

Shall we...

-give allegiance to God or to our job?

-support poor people getting a chance or work for the survival of the fittest?

-be a strong and mighty nation where we are always #1 OR shall we be sharing our skills and resources with others?

-support politicians who are only in office for their own well-being OR work for fair practices and policies?

-be less than truthful with our spouse OR fess up to something we recently did?

-ignore someone because they ignored us OR shall we rise above that?

-work that all people in our country have equal opportunity OR work to keep our place secured in the pecking order.

-love our neighbor who annoys us OR just annoy them back?

-allow others to get credit for good work OR do we need to be in the spotlight always receiving accolades?

-pretend that we are a strong family for public appearances OR work to figure out how to be healthier as a family?

-ignore the practices of a family member OR lovingly face them to mend their ways?

-heard all our resources for a "rainy day" OR share more fully the bounty God has blessed us with?

-say to someone special to us how much we affirm them and appreciate them OR just keep it to ourselves?

-affirm our children as they grow and develop OR constantly belittle them as they are not doing well enough.

Jesus had the test also and had to decide if he was going to "hit the mark" or "miss it." Was he going to follow the Will of his Father or go his own way? Was he clear what his real purpose in life was? Was he willing to accept the new life and new direction?

A word of grace is found in this story, verse 13, "...and the angels waited on him." The good news, this incredibly good news is that Jesus was not alone in the wilderness testing with Satan. "The angels waited on him." They were there. He was not tested solo!

And the same is true for you and me. We are not flying solo. We are not alone. In all testing, angels are waiting on us. Angels are caring for us. Angels are there.

It could be that our biggest problem is that we will not acknowledge that we are actually being tested. We will not own up to the fact that we are in a struggle and having to answer whose side are we on? Who shall I follow? Where will I put all my marbles?

For it seems to me that in every situation in our life, we are having to decide which way to go: God's way or my way. God's demands or my desires? God's intention or my druthers? God's claim on me or my way?

And yet our assurance is that angels wait on us, are with us, are for us. We can make the decision resting on that promise. By doing so, we can rest easy to follow God's way.

Are you hitting the mark or are you missing the mark?

One thing is for sure: we are regularly being asked to take aim. To seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. It is dangerous because it goes against everything this world stands for. It is counter-cultural. It goes against the tide.

But, it is God's way we are called to choose.