

# First Sunday in Lent

## SURPRISINGLY SATISFIED

Mark 1:9-15

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news."

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## DIAGNOSIS: Suckered–Taken for a Ride

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Suckered into Scarcity*

Listen to us murmur and complain, and you would think that we were Hebrew slaves wandering in the wilderness. It's the same old temptation as for Adam and Eve—suckered by a snake into believing that we are missing out on something big when we depend solely on God. Devilish ads plant in our gut a sense of

“lack” and “want.” Closets bulge with stuff we thought would make us happy. The biggest real estate play of the past decade has been self-storage space. And still we want MORE. One blogger puts it this way: “It’s rich people trying to sell you stuff you don’t need by selling you an image of a life you’ll never have.” The wilderness of Mark 1:13 is symbolic of our dry, barren existence; a rocky, crusty, deadly sea of scarcity even as we drown deep over our heads in an ocean of plenty.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Scared**

Our obsession with this mirage is born of “fear.” And fear leads to hoarding. In a dog-eat-dog world, the strong get more while the weak get less. Note the sharp contrast between (a) the beastly “abundance” of Herod Antipas’ perverted birthday bash (6:21) and of the scribes who love to have the places of honor at banquets (12:39) as opposed to (b) the dire “poverty” of the very widows whose homes they “devour” (12:41-44). Here at home we see a growing gulf between the 1% and the 99%. Yet how can we in the 99% throw self-serving pity-parties, when we also live pretty decadent and opulent lives compared to many in the global world around us? Behind it all is our fear of death, especially a cross-bound, god-forsaken one. Witness the great temptation for Jesus to avoid the cross when Peter takes him aside and rebukes him (and Jesus’ distressful agitation and agonizing prayer in the garden shows just how tempting Peter’s word were, despite his original rebuttal!). Never should we ever think it was “easy” for Jesus to die upon that cross when he prayed to the Father three times to “remove this cup from me.” Our own fear of dying and our avoidance of a cross is just as much a part of these forty days of Lent as they were for Jesus.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Scorched**

The Judean wilderness is hot, dry, withering, harsh, hard, rocky, cruel, and deadly to those who go it alone. And God’s judgment is more scathing still, says Isaiah (40:24), a prophet

often quoted by Mark and loudly echoed in Jesus' own parabolic cursing of a fig tree "withered to its roots"(14:20-22). This has nothing to do with trees and everything to do with those who "have no faith in God."

## **PROGNOSIS: Succored—A Scapegoat Running to the Rescue**

### **Step 4 Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Scapegoated**

God does not put a protective bubble around God's beloved Son. Instead, no sooner does God declare Jesus to be "My son, the beloved," then the Holy Spirit "drives" him out into the very deadly wilderness in which we live. The Greek word for "drive" (ekballo, throw out) is an exceptionally forceful one. It is the same muscular verb used for God driving Adam out of the garden, for Jesus "driving out" the unclean spirits in exorcism after exorcism, and for Jesus driving out those selling and buying in the temple. Picture a peasant farmer goading a reluctant animal forward with a stick. Or better yet, the scapegoat being driven out into the wilderness on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). On that holiest of days, the high priest would lay both hands on a God-selected he-goat to transfer to him the sins of all the people and then have him driven out into the wilderness to expel those sins from the community. (Which means, of course, that John the Baptist needs to be corrected: Jesus is the "goat of God who takes away the sins of the world.")

By his submission to a baptism meant for sinners only, the sins of all the people are laid on Jesus by the Father's own hand. And then, Jesus is "driven out" into our wilderness. Yet miraculously, just like in the wilderness of Sinai, that place of certain death becomes an amazing place of life because God is there. Jesus is "ministered to" (the verbal form of diakonia) by the angels, which means he is fed with food from heaven and taken care of by God. Already here we have a clear indication of

the final outcome. Jesus will successfully resist temptation, surrender to the cross, and be raised by God for his faithful obedience to God's will. Already here in the temptation of our Lord, God's ultimate victory in Christ is assured. And that is good news for us. For Jesus is God-in-the-flesh running to our rescue in the very broken world in which we live.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Surprisingly Sated**

Jesus satisfies our most pressing needs. The feeding of the 5,000 and the 4,000 is the exact opposite of Herod Antipas's beastly, head-chopping, drunken brawls for a select few of his hand-picked buddies and the scribal predators' devouring of the widows' houses. For with Jesus as the host, it is the miracle of manna in the wilderness all over again, yet even better than before. Jesus feeds both Jews and Gentiles from what looks like a very meager meal: first five loaves and two small fish; and then seven loaves and a few fish; and finally a naked body hanging on a cross. And yet, we hear in Mark 6:42 & 8:8 that all ate and were "FILLED!" (echortheasthesan!, another muscular Markan verb that screams "gorged," "absolutely sated," "belly-bulging, turkey-day stuffed-to-the -gills full"). And we cannot possibly over-exaggerate the blessedness for first-century subsistence farmers of being totally full for once! The good news of such a magnificent fullness out of such a meager start can chase away our fears, if only we will let it, and replace them all with faith. It can even help us face our deaths and crosses, both the big one and the little ones. This is the very miracle we experience week after week at the table of our Lord when we see it for what it truly is—the bread of life, the cup of salvation, and a foretaste of a feast to come. Christians don't throw "pity parties"; they throw "eucharistic feasts" that passionately feed on the body and blood of Christ. And then, they "go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

## **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Spiritedly Served & Serving**

Peter's mother-in-law becomes the model of Christian ministry (1:31). She is paralyzed in bed, on the brink of death with a high fever (that scorching heat again). Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up (a resurrection preview). The fever leaves her and she begins to serve/minister (the same verbal form of diakonia that was used for the angels ministering to Jesus). Follow that verb "minister" in Mark and there is a chain reaction. The angels (God) minister to Jesus. Jesus ministers to us ("the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom [scapegoat] for others," 10:45). And we serve others. In Mark's gospel, the women are much more a model for Christian discipleship than any of the men. Outside of Jesus and the angels, only women "serve." But hopefully by now, the boys have caught on to this chain reaction, too.

Diakonia implies hands-on help, the waiting of tables, actual physical assistance to those in need. Although we are continually tempted, the disciples of Jesus do not obsess over our lack of things and the scarcity of our resources. Rather, trusting that God will provide everything that we need for this body and life, we use whatever we do have to bring the good news of Jesus Christ in real, practical ways to others. From Jesus we do not get a new set of "laws" but rather a new "life" forcefully led by the Spirit. And although the Spirit of Jesus Christ may lead us to and through a cross, in the end we are lifted up, raised, filled, and totally satisfied. This is the movement from the ashes of Ash Wednesday through the passion of our Lord to the flames of Pentecost. It is the very transformation that takes place in our lives as we are plunged deep over our heads in the waters of baptism and are raised to the abundance of Christ's grace. Echorthesthesan! Belly-busting full!