

# First Sunday in Lent

## “LIVING THE FULFILLING LIFE”

Mark 1:9-15

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Analysis by James Squire

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: Bad “Living”

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Looking Bad*

If we need reminding that we are unclean, the Lenten season does the trick for us. Just like those folks who flocked to the Jordan River, we come to church, especially for midweek Vespers, to sing hymns written in minor keys that dwell on how our sins got Jesus in trouble. We come on Ash Wednesday to be marked with ashes and contemplate the dust we shall return to. And like those folks who came to the river, we go through this annual penance ritual in the hope that we might feel better about

ourselves on Easter and beyond when this time to rejoice. These 6 or 7 weeks are the time of the year to be “cleansed.” It helps us not feel so guilty the rest of the year.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Feeling Bad***

Feelings of guilt are exactly what drove those people to the Jordan River, and what drives us to the ashes of Ash Wednesday and to Lenten Vespers. In truth, we are desperate to get rid of this guilt. If the baptizer has hung out his shingle at the Jordan River, that’s where we want to be. If it’s Wednesday, it must be Vespers and the chance to put on the solemn demeanor and work off a little guilt. And yet, it’s the same thing, year after year. It’s a never-ending cycle, and the truth is that deep down inside we can’t wait for Lent to come around again. Lent is a month and a half, but feeling bad is all year long. Far from getting rid of it, we get used to it and think we can, or at least must, live with it.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Overcome by Bad***

We kid ourselves. There is no living with guilt, for the deepest truth revealed by our bad feelings is our self-judgment. As Robert Bertram, of blessed memory, used to teach, “feeling bad” can have two meanings. Usually, we mean the opposite of happy feelings, but sometimes what we really mean is the opposite of good, where bad and good are judgment words. We feel bad not simply because we are down, but because we know we are bad. Worse yet, we know that opinion comes from God, the giver of the law, and there is no way to work that off.

## **PROGNOSIS: Living (!) in the Good News of Christ**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Rescued and Fulfilled by Christ***

They came to the river for the annual cleansing. What they got instead was the Beloved, with the dove of heavenly peace hovering over his head. Moreover, reports the evangelist, the

heavens were torn open and a voice expressed divine approval as Jesus emerged from the waters of repentance. This much might only make us envious. But then, the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness – our wilderness – where he spends a long time without food or companionship. Indeed he has nothing but an echo in his memory of what God said from heaven back at his baptism. With temptation surrounding him, he was getting a lot of negative feedback about himself, which is the very nature of our wilderness, both externally and internally. Yet he emerged from that wilderness with his Good News intact and ready to shower it upon us, inviting us into his kingdom via repentance. He took our negative feedback and gave us his positive feedback in exchange, feedback which in both cases has the divine sanction spoken from heaven that bright, sunny day. On his cross he took on our “bad” and exchanged it for his “good,” and he emerged also from that wilderness victorious over death for us.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Repentance Restores Good Feelings through Belief in Good News*

There is now within us the power and strength to turn away from the never-ending cycle of washing off our own guilt, and to turn (reveling) toward our new cleanliness in Christ. The bad judgment has been disposed of by Christ on his cross. While bad emotional feelings continue to be a fact of life for us this side of heaven, we are no longer stuck with feeling bad about ourselves as sinners, for we have been redeemed in the waters of Christ’s baptism. That “dirt” he washed away in the river Jordan was ours! Now for the crux of the matter: Do you believe it? “Believe in the good news,” Jesus commands us (v. 15). The very Spirit who descended like a Dove on the head of Jesus, gives us the power and strength to do just that, and therefore to live. Really live!

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Looking Good as*

## *Beloved*

We now have the strength to live the “good” life. In Christ, God’s “Beloved,” we look good, no matter what the world says. We come to the season of Lent knowing that Christ makes us clean, not our own pious solemnity. We also discover that while we had certainly recognized our need for cleansing in the past, we never really understand just how dirty we are, until Christ makes us clean. Maybe we are no longer reluctant to really listen to those words, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The cleansing Christ gives us in our baptism makes it possible for us to fully acknowledge the depths of our sin, and rejoice in the salvation that repentance brings. In Christ we learn not to wallow, absorbed by our guilt, but to rejoice in the righteousness Christ gives to us, and to share that righteousness with our fellow penitents.