

Traditionally, the first Sunday of Lent is Marked by a reading of the temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness. Today's reading includes temptation or testing by Satan and much more as God prepares Jesus for his mission.

Listen

Reading ~ Mark 1:9-15

9 In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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

The will to win is nearly as important as the will to prepare to win. That is written on a big, framed poster and a small postcard-size picture framed in my office. This saying, "**The will to win is nearly as important as the will to prepare to win,**" is attributed to various famous people from the sports world in one form or another. Bobby Knight, Vince Lombardi, Joe Paterno, and Fielding Yost are possibilities and the latter is probably the originator of the saying around the turn of the twentieth century as a coach at Michigan.

The sentiment is perfect for the season of Lent. Easter is far more important and meaningful when we prepare for it. To that end, our young people will help us with our preparation each week by offering a weekly spiritual discipline challenge for us.

I hear today's Scripture as a three-fold call to prepare ourselves for Easter. **A Ready, Set, Go,** it proclaims. It is based on Jesus' preparation for his ministry.

READY

We recently spent much time with John the Baptist during Advent before Christmas. So, I want to start with the voice of God as our get Ready.

God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased." God spoke this, and only Jesus heard it. It let him know that he was God's beloved son and that God was pleased with and proud of him. It stirred his soul and helped him get ready for his mission of love and redemption and bringing people back home to God.

Around Labor Day, I have been attending a retreat with several pastors led by my friend Tom McFarlane, who is a pastoral counselor. Before we moved away and Tom moved to Florida, we used to gather weekly to support and talk with one another in our lives and ministry.

In one meeting, he said something I have never forgotten: "Every man wants to be blessed by his father. All men share this longing." My father died way too soon for me to experience the blessing once.

My foster father, who raised me from thirteen, blessed me. I was an adult visiting when we were out meeting someone I didn't know, and he said, "That's my boy," like he was proud of me, and that was a blessing.

I was also blessed by my cousin David, who was older than I was. He was the cousin who meant so much to me right after my father's death. I remember him putting an arm around me in the backyard, and I felt secure.

A few years ago, he sent this note.

I am very proud of you-you have grown to be a careful loving person - honorable and kind. You had a difficult childhood and must always remember your dad loved you very much. Congratulations on raising an honorable family; you should be proud of your achievements. I have enclosed a photo of your grandmother, Rachel. Stay strong and healthy-we all love you.

Your Old Cousin,
David Levine

Now, there is a blessing.

I have learned that we all long for blessings not only from God but from fathers and others as well.

Jesus' blessing by God undergirded his whole ministry and saw him through times of difficulty, opposition, and, ultimately, the cross.

Jesus knew blessings were also crucial for all of us. One of our favorite parts of the Bible is the Sermon on the Mount, where he blesses people.

5 And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated, His disciples came to Him. ² Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.

⁵ Blessed *are* the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.

⁷ Blessed *are* the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ Blessed *are* the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.

⁹ Blessed *are* the peacemakers,
For they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed *are* those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Beatitudes are beloved because they bless real people in real-life situations that we all may experience. And they carry a promise of hope.

That is why I close our services each week with some form of God loves you, adores you, treasures you and you are held in God's very heart. That is a blessing and a promise of hope.

Our own blessing should also remind us that, like Abraham, God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

The blessing of Jesus and our blessing is the first step in our lives of faith. It is, as the song proclaims, a summons: People Get Ready.

Set

The second feature of Jesus' preparation is facing temptation, getting set.

That captures the theme of Lent and why it is traditional for the first Sunday in Lent. Although Mark doesn't tell us the nature of the temptations or tests Jesus faces, that is okay. We can imagine the tests and temptations we meet in life are of the same type: those things we encounter that would draw us away from being and doing what we are called to do and be. For Jesus, it would have been to turn away from his mission of servanthood, give his life as a ransom for many, and choose shortcuts or paths that led anywhere but the cross.

What keeps us from being the people God calls us to be, blessings to the world? I can't name everything, but I want to reflect on one that speaks deeply.

I have another poster on my wall and a smaller sample on my office door. Amongst all the pictures and souvenirs from Jimmy Buffett and Peter Mayer is a poster you saw on the cover of our annual report.

The poster is based on the questions asked of Jesus by a lawyer who wants to know what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus asked, "What does the law say and how do you read it?" The lawyer replied that there are two great commandments: love your God and your neighbor. **"But just who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asks.** So, Jesus tells the story. A certain man, a Jew, traveling on the Jericho Road, falls amongst thieves and has been beaten, left for dead, and on the side of the road. I remember a sermon by Dr. King as he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A priest and a Levite, good Jewish folks, pass by without stopping. Martin Luther King Jr asked their question: "What will happen to us if we stop?" But a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jewish people, does stop, renders aid, and provides for his care. And that prompts Dr King's second comment: "What will happen to the man if I don't stop?" That was the Samaritan's question. And someone building on Dr King's message said there is a third question, our question: "What will happen to me if I don't stop?" That has always stuck with me: What will happen to me if I don't stop? I think it erodes my soul when I don't stop.

Jesus says now, “Who was neighbor to the one in need?” and the lawyer replies, “The one who showed mercy” to which Jesus replies, “Go and do likewise.” We are commanded to be neighbors to the ones in need, even if they differ from us.

Back to the poster. Remember the poster; it declares, “Love your neighbor who doesn’t look like you, think like you, love like you, speak like you, pray like you, vote like you. Love your neighbor. No exceptions.”

In our times of great division, we need to step up to the challenge to love our neighbor with no exceptions. To me, to ignore this is the greatest temptation we face in our times. If you have received my personal email, you will have seen a YouTube link to my favorite song, Dance with Everybody, with the line “I want to dance with everybody who came through the door.”

That’s one of the main reasons we have open doors for everyone at our church, so we might welcome all who wish to be here and welcome them to a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. In being inclusive, we are blessing others with God’s love.

So, ready: our blessing; set: overcoming temptation, and now, go.

Go

Jesus begins his mission after being blessed and being tested. He is ready to start. And so are we. The rest of the gospel is what he does; he is blessed and tempted and thus prepared to go into the world in love, and so are we.

Look around. We are getting old ish and can’t do what we used to. I found two powerlifting certificates the other day where I set state records for my age and weight. And now, when I go to the Y, I can only lift a small fraction of what I used to handle with ease. I used to have this vision of competing when I was 80. I have recaptured that, although I will admit with all my surgeries, I could only do the bench press and right now, I can only use machines because I worry that if I lie down on the bench, I won’t be able to get back up. But I want to work toward it.

The same is true with the ministry. We can’t do some of the things we used to do. But I need to show up at the Y, and we need to go into the world however we can to be a blessing to others. And I am so proud of how we do that in supporting the mission in our church community and the broader world.