

Series: "The Way"
Baptism and Temptation

Mark 1:9-15

John Breon

Brian Scudamore is the founder and CEO of a company called 1-800-GOT-JUNK? Scudamore's company goes to people's houses and hauls off stuff that people don't want anymore. He says, "It's difficult for people to get rid of junk. They get attached to things and let them define who they are. If there's one thing I've learned in this business, it's that *you are what you can't let go of.*" (*The Way I See It #70: Brian Scudamore Founder and CEO of 1-800-GOT-JUNK?—from Starbucks website*).

You are what you can't let go of. That sounds like something that relates to more than just excess household stuff. It sounds like it might speak about life and about our spiritual experience. No wonder John the Baptist and Jesus told people to repent, to turn from sin, to let it go, if we are what we can't let go of. And, on our own, we can't just let go of sin because it has such a grip on us. We need help. Our Scripture tells us more about this.

Mark presents three scenes from Jesus' life in rapid succession here. I haven't seen the *Son of God* movie, but if this section of Mark were a movie, we'd see the first scene flash on the screen. Then, with dramatic music, the screen would go black. Then the next scene would come up. Then the screen goes black. Then the third scene begins. The beginning and end of each scene might be punctuated with dramatic music, loud drums or something.

Scene 1: Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan River where he is baptized by John. Scene 2: Jesus is in the wilderness, the desert, enduring Satan's temptations. Scene 3: John is put in prison and Jesus goes into Galilee preaching the good news of God.

Let's walk through each of these scenes and see what they tell us about Jesus. Let's hear how he still calls to us, "Repent and believe the good news!" Let's see if we can find some resources for clearing some of the junk out of our lives.

Jesus comes from his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee to the south where John is preaching and baptizing in the Jordan River. Mark has already introduced John as an Old Testament type of prophet. He announces that people need to prepare for the Lord's coming by repenting of their sins and being baptized as a sign of repentance. This will get them ready for one who is coming who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Then Jesus approaches and is baptized by John. Jesus doesn't have sin to repent of. Why is he baptized? He's identifying with John's ministry and affirming John's message. He's setting an example for others who will follow him. He's relating to those he came to save.

But mostly Mark focuses on the baptism of Jesus as his going public, beginning his ministry. In his baptism, Jesus is identified as God's Son. As Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees heaven being torn open. The Spirit, the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, comes upon Jesus. God the Father speaks to Jesus from the open heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

God anoints and affirms Jesus here. The Spirit's descent shows that Jesus is God's Anointed One, the Messiah. The Father's declaration announces Jesus as Son of God.

All kinds of Old Testament background is here. Jesus enters the water like Israel did at the Red Sea leaving Egypt and at the Jordan entering the promised land. God brought his people through the water and delivered them, making them his own. Now, Jesus goes through the water and is declared to be the One who will deliver God's people.

The heavens being torn open may recall Isaiah 64:1 where the prophet prays, "O that you would rend the heavens and come down." He was looking for God to come with salvation and deliverance. In Jesus God does come in the person of his Son to be the Savior.

One of the reasons we are baptized is to follow the example of Jesus. As with Jesus, in our baptism God's Spirit comes upon and within us. Water baptism is a sign of Spirit-baptism. We are immersed, engulfed, saturated with the Holy Spirit who is the life and power and presence of God. God also affirms us in baptism, claiming us as his own, declaring that we are God's children. Baptism tells us who we are and reminds us whose we are.

I remember a skit that a youth group did years ago. It told a story about a character named Christian who was walking through the city and came to a beautiful stream in a park. Encouraged by some other people, he waded through the stream. Life on the other side seemed the same. The surroundings were ordinary. But Christian's shoes never dried out. And they began to squish. He first noticed the squish as he knelt to pray. Once, he fell down and as he got up he distinctly heard the squish. He heard it as he stepped forward to help someone in need. After a while, he heard it with almost every step, as he walked through his ordinary life. Can we remember our baptism—hear the squish— at every step of our walk with God?

We might think that being filled with God's Spirit would make life easier and trouble-free. But we'd be wrong. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, anointing and affirmation, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he spends forty days being tested by Satan. The word for "drive" there is a strong word that can mean to cast out. So the Spirit of God practically flings Jesus into the desert, which many believed to be the dwelling place of demons. So Jesus is going to face Satan in Satan's own territory. The mention of wild animals heightens the danger of where Jesus is. But he's not alone. He is still the Spirit-anointed Son of God. And, Mark tells us, "Angels attended or waited on him." He has supernatural help from God's heavenly messengers.

Again, Jesus is almost reliving Israel's experience. Israel came through the water as God delivered them from slavery. Then they went into the wilderness where God tested them to see if they would obey and be faithful. But the people tested God, groaning and complaining, wondering if God was really with them and would really care for them. When they first came to the land God promised them, they refused to go up and take it. So they were sent back into the wilderness for forty years.

In the wilderness Israel had some amazing experiences of God. But also in the wilderness they often failed the test, rebelled against God and suffered God's wrath. Jesus also faces real tests in the wilderness. Mark doesn't describe the details of what Jesus went through there, but he tells us enough to know that Jesus passed the test. He overcame the adversary. Where Israel failed, Jesus overcame.

Lloyd Ogilvie describes how we experience the wilderness in our lives, and what God's purpose is in that experience:

We begin the Christian life with the liberating experience of God's grace penetrating to the depth of our souls. But he does not leave us there. The wilderness temptation follows as surely as night follows day. Like Jesus, the assurance of the anointing is followed by the tempering of testing temptation. He will not leave us half-healed; excited but unchanged. He knows that unless we are liberated at the core we cannot stay alive. We cannot live a new life with old values, motives and attitudes (*Life Without Limits* 26).

The wilderness can be a place of purifying for us if we continue to rely on God.

We all experience temptation and tests of faith in various ways. Have you ever promised not to do something? What quickly happens? You can't stop thinking about that thing you've determined not to do. Or, you make a commitment to do something and almost immediately distractions pop up and you start finding excuses not to do it. Just when we think we've got it together, it starts falling apart. We have choices to make in those situations. Overcoming is not automatic.

Those experiences prove the reality of Paul's warning, in a passage where he compares Christian life to Israel's wilderness experience. He writes, "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" How true to life that is. But Paul goes on, "No temptation/testing/trial has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted/tested/tried beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted/tested/tried, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Cor 10:12, 13). Those are some great verses to remember. Also remember that Jesus withstood the full force of temptation and did not fall—and he is with us to help us.

Now we come to Scene 3. Mark just mentions in an offhand way that John the Baptizer was put in prison and he doesn't explain this until chapter 6. John's imprisonment could have discouraged Jesus. The one who was

Jesus' forerunner, preparing his way, the one who baptized Jesus, the one whose ministry and message Jesus affirmed, is arrested and taken into custody. Jesus could have retreated. He could have seen this as a sign not to go through with proclaiming the gospel he has been anointed to proclaim. Most of us would have been discouraged: Why try? Will it make any difference? Will they do to me what they did to John? What many might interpret as despair, Jesus discerned as God's signal to begin (Ogilvie 32).

So he began. He went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. This is what he said, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Jesus is all about God's gospel, God's time and God's kingdom. Gospel means good news. That's what Jesus had to announce. That good news is that God's time has arrived. This is not just calendar time or clock time; it's opportune time, fulfillment time. God is bursting on the scene in what Jesus says and does. The content of this fulfillment is the kingdom of God. The kingdom is God's rule, when and where God's will is actively done. God's kingdom is not some vague future hope. It's a present reality. Jesus embodies it, inaugurates it, brings it into the present age and invites others to enter into it and live the life of God's kingdom now in anticipation of the kingdom's fullness that will come someday.

The proper response to this proclamation is to repent—mourn the brokenness caused by sin, return to God and at the same time turn from all that is not God's will, all that opposes God's kingdom. Repent and believe—that is, put your trust in and rely on the gospel. And, for Mark, Jesus is the Gospel. So we don't even repent out of our own resources. We're not able to—sin's grip is too strong. Even if we want to let it go, we can't. And we are what we can't let go of. So we also believe, trust, rely on the good news that God in Christ is here to help us, to deliver us, to save us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we let go, we turn to God and away from sin.

Dallas Willard expresses Jesus' message this way: "Jesus then came into Galilee announcing the good news from God. 'All the preliminaries have been taken care of,' he said, 'and the rule of God is now accessible to

everyone. Review your plans for living and base your life on this remarkable opportunity.'"

Willard goes on to illustrate what it means for the kingdom, the rule, of God to be "at hand." He tells about growing up in rural southern Missouri where electricity was not available. But during his senior year of high school the Rural Electrification Administration extended its lines into the area where Willard's family lived and electrical power became available to households and farms.

When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life—daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it—could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements, understand them, and take the practical steps involved in *relying* on it.

...it will help us to understand Jesus' basic message about the kingdom...if we pause to reflect on those farmers who, in effect, heard the message: "Repent, for electricity is at hand." Repent, or turn from their kerosene lamps and lanterns, their iceboxes and cellars, their scrubboards and rug beaters, their woman-powered sewing machines and their radios with dry-cell batteries.

The power that could make their lives far better was right there near them where, by making relatively simple arrangements, they could utilize it. Strangely, a few did not accept it. They did not "enter the kingdom of electricity." Some just didn't want to change. Others could not afford it, or so they thought. (*The Divine Conspiracy* 15, 30-31)

Are we willing to repent, to rethink our way of life and to allow God to exchange it for a new kind of life, to enter into the life of God's rule of love and power? It's available. Will we let God wire us up and connect us to himself as the source of life as God means us to live?

Reaffirmation of Baptism

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift offered to us without price. Through the reaffirmation of our faith we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy church.

And so I ask you, will you turn away from the powers of sin and death?

We renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin!

Will you live in freedom as God's people?

We accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves!

Do you confess Jesus Christ and will you live as his followers?

We confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races!

Will you be living witnesses to the gospel, individually and together?

We will remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world.

Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

We affirm and teach the faith of the whole church as we put our trust in God, the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ, his only Son, and in the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore we joyfully remember our baptism in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Remember your baptism and be thankful. The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

You are invited to come forward and use water as a sign of refreshing. Take a shell from the water as a reminder of your baptism, or in anticipation of your baptism, and God's faithfulness.

We give thanks for all that God has already given us. As members of the body of Christ and in this congregation of the United Methodist Church, we will faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

The God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, establish and strengthen you by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you may live in grace and peace.

Amen.

(This service is adapted from the *UM Hymnal* #50, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and <http://www.gbod.org/lead-your-church/baptism1/resource/new-service-of-reaffirmation-of-the-baptismal-covenant?print=1>)