

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Back when I was newly ordained and serving in a parish, the pastor and I would always plan our annual spiritual retreats far in advance in order to make sure that one of us would be able to cover for the other one's absence for a full work week. And somehow every year when one or the other of us returned home from retreat we got in the habit of exchanging a corny joke that was funny mostly because it wasn't very funny. The priest who had stayed at church that week would welcome the retreatant back by saying, "How was your retreat?" The standard response was, "It was wonderful!" the first guy would say, "Really? You don't *look* any different," to which the reply was, "Ah, but *you* do!" (I told you it wasn't funny). And I suppose whatever wisdom there was in that silly dialogue was simply to realize that a time of spiritual refreshment is not so much for the benefit of everybody else who encounters us afterward as it is for the benefit of *us* who do the encountering of *others*. Yet at the same time, if a retreat really has been useful and significant then one would expect to notice some evidence of change or growth in the one who experienced it—perhaps he/she returns with a little more patience or relaxation, or with less stress and frenzy. Maybe the retreatant comes home with a new resolve to change a bad habit or to begin a new, good one. Or maybe with just a bit more insight about how to address a problem. Any good spiritual retreat is not solely concerned with resting or recreation, although that's often part of it. A retreat is often also very hard work and very focused energy. Being very quiet and undistracted for a long period of time can frequently make the hours seem endless, and the urge to engage in idle activity can be powerful.

The gospel of Mark on the first Sunday of Lent finds Jesus being sent off to a desert retreat, led by God's Spirit. There in the overwhelming void so many of the whisperings of the demons that usually get drowned out by busyness or noise start to make their presence felt. The voices that we usually try to subdue by ignoring them or by distracting ourselves make their menacing presence known. Temptations that we'd prefer to think don't much trouble us reveal that they can be *very* capable of clamoring for attention. A retreat demands a discipline from us that almost no other experience demands.

But of the three other gospel writers in the Bible who report this story of Jesus' time out in the desert, this one from Mark is the only one that doesn't try to tell us just what happened to him during those 40 days. It recalls no conversations between Satan and Jesus, and it doesn't mention exactly what the temptations *were*. So we are left with a question and with a task as we hear the gospel yet again today. The Question is this: Why include the story at all, if it tells us none of the details? This event is inserted in all of the gospels immediately after Jesus' baptism by John and immediately before he begins his public ministry. But what's the point of doing that if it's just a passing detail that doesn't affect the rest of the story? The obvious answer is that surely it *does* affect the rest of the story, and coming at the very beginning—in Chapter 1—it's going to affect the *entirety* of what happens afterward. That's why Mark bothers to remember it. But how can we understand why that's important if we aren't told what exactly takes place out in the desert?

We're going to have to rely on that same method that we still use today when we encounter people who have returned from retreat experiences. That's the *Task*. More specifically, the task is to take notice of *how* they come back from time away; what's different about them? How have they changed? What's been stirred up in them because of that retreat, and what seems to have quieted down? What seems to be newly urgent about their energy, and what anxieties seem to have been soothed? What kind of *vision* accompanies the return from the desert discipline?

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In the case of Jesus, the answers to those things is plain to see. He returns with a noticeable impatience and immediacy about his mission: “*Now* is the time of fulfillment! *Now* is God’s reign at hand! Repent! Believe!” Clearly, there is no time to lose. It’s fundamentally the very same message that John the Baptist had been proclaiming before, but what’s different with Jesus is the immanent “right-now”-ness of it all. This reign of God is of such necessity, and the conditions for its erupting are so perfectly aligned and so near at hand that the opportunity must be seized *today* or risk being lost. The danger that Jesus appears to be alarmed by is the danger of complacency, or the danger of being deluded into thinking that we can all afford to put it off and delay awhile. Jesus has listened to Satan in the desert, and knows that nothing would please Satan more than the idea that time wasn’t of much essence, that you and I won’t be much harmed by making the Kingdom a project of second-rank priority. “There’s always tomorrow.”

The intensity of Jesus preaching announces exactly the opposite: There *won’t* always be tomorrow, and while we choose to postpone our repentance and conversion, evil is given the opportunity to grow and to multiply and to make our task of discipleship even more difficult. Our greatest enemy is the one that we fail to recognize as the enemy at all, and that is time. We’ve been given the gift of a lot of it—time to make the most important choices of our lives—but time is not without limit. It has an end. And if we might allow ourselves to imagine how Jesus’ retreat in the desert has altered the way *we* appear to *him*, it seems that he is seeing us as people who are insufficiently alarmed by the shortness of time. Whatever the specific contents of the conversations and temptations with Satan may have been out there, *that* is what their effect on Jesus was. “Now! *Now* is the time of fulfillment. Repent! Believe! Now!”