

First Sunday of Lent, Year B
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The prevailing school of thought for several decades taught that people experience grief in stages. The frequently-taught stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Good grieving, it was thought, follows through these stages.

As the experts have thought more about how grief works and interviewed more people, a newer model rose up. The stages were still helpful, but maybe people don't go through them in a prescribed order. The second generation of grief scholars suggested that the human response to losing something we love is more complicated than we first thought.

I think they're probably right. I used to run a community grief support group on Monday nights. It was free and open to the public, and I assure you, the public showed up. People came with all kind of grief to share their experiences and to find, in one of God's more beautiful acts of grace, that they had more in common than not. That they weren't alone. Some people came for a few weeks and then didn't need the group anymore. Others stayed longer.

I believe that our life of faith comes with different stages. The church has traditionally thought that we go from baptism to confirmation to marriage to absolution and to burial. It looks good on paper, though it's probably a little naïve to think that life follows that trajectory so naturally. It certainly hasn't for me, and I imagine it hasn't for you either. There have been times when I felt like I needed to be re-baptized. Or times when I felt like I was already buried, six feet under. At confirmation, they tell us that we're adults, but surely we can feel like children at any decade of this life.

A wonderful French filmmaker named Jean Luc Godard observed that "a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order."

The Gospel reading today dives into the heart of our faith in short and powerful sentences. Never one to waste words, Mark's Jesus is baptized, is tempted, and is preaching in all of 150 words. It occurred to me while reading the Gospel that Mark is offering an alternative system in which to understand the Christian life. He suggests three stages: baptism, temptation, and preaching.

Perhaps these are the form of the Christian life that we can consider during Lent.

All things flow, of course, from our baptism. We are free to take a ruthless self-examination of our sin, our complicity in the nastiness of the world precisely because we will not be swept away by it. We always belong to God, even when we feel the weight of our own sin. That baptism cannot be taken away.

I am intrigued that, directly after his baptism, Jesus finds himself tempted. It's not a very modern way to think about religion. We use tempted in modern English to talk about a piece of chocolate or a second glass of wine. But tempted in this Gospel is a bigger word. We're talking about the wilderness and devils...going deep into the heart of darkness, into the depths of the soul.

Tempted to look inside, choose the rewards of this world, and reject our God. That's the kind of high octane temptation Mark is talking about. Mark is talking about power. About money. About lust. The things that really divert us from God. Do you see power and money and lust in the headlines? How is temptation directing the news of the day—the constant shootings, the hungry kids in our city, the folks living paycheck to paycheck. What is the role of temptation in the lives of the powerbrokers who make decisions for the common good? And how does it interact with our faith? Temptation might be old-fashioned to talk about, but it is decidedly modern to experience. The devil hasn't stopped whispering.

After Jesus survives his temptation, he preaches. You'll notice that Jesus wasn't made into a priest or a pastor before he started preaching. He just bursts into preaching after surviving his temptation—telling anyone who would listen about the good things that God has done. That's raw, beautiful preaching. You might not think of yourself as a preacher, but I guarantee that each time you tell a friend or a colleague about something wonderful that you see in your life because of the goodness of God, or the loveliness of the church, you are preaching.

And, like all systems, it's not done just once. You'll feel the need to remember your baptism many times over the course of your life. There will be times when you're tongue-tied and cannot preach about the goodness of God. There will be times when you're tempted in the wilderness and can't find your way and wonder where God is. Around and around we go—this is the life of faith.

Lent can be an opportunity to take a deeper look at the stages of the Christian life. Lent can be an opportunity to take your spiritual temperature—are you able to remember your baptism and the vows you made or were made on your behalf? Are you in a season of temptation where you are feeling beset by forces or feeling far away from God? Are you called to preach the Good News of Christ to friends and neighbors? I'm not sure where you find yourself right now, but the grace of the thing is that you are probably right where you need to be. And the other grace of the thing is that God is with you wherever you are. And the church is with you wherever you are, whatever stage you're experiencing. Lent is not an individual sport. We're in this together. The clergy. The people. And most importantly, our God. Amen.