

# St. Matthew's Church

## NEW YORK CITY

### **THE DAY OF DECISION**

**Mark 1:9-13**

**First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2009**

In very life thee come moments of decision which may be accepted or rejected. To accept them is to succeed; to reject them is to fail. The statement by Mr. Lowell is quite correct:

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide  
In the strife for truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,  
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right  
And the choice goes by for ever 'twixt that darkness and that light.

To every man there comes the un-returning decisive moment. The undecided life, the frustrated life, the discontented life, and often the tragic life and we all know that the drifting life can never be the happy life. Jesus knew when John emerged that the moment of decision had come. Nazareth was peaceful and home was sweet, but he answered the summons and the challenge of God.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Mark provides the most descriptive introduction of our Lord's temptation found in any of the Gospels: "At once the Spirit sent Him out into the desert, and He was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him." From this we understand that immediately after His baptism, when He saw the heavens tear apart and the Holy Spirit descend into Him and heard the Father's voice pronounce; "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased," He felt an inexorable compulsion from the Holy Spirit to plunge further into the wilderness to duel Satan. Heaven had opened. Now Hell opened. In Jewish thought the wilderness was viewed as a place of danger, gloom, and the abode of demons. The mention of "wild

animals” underscores this idea; the wilderness was a place of loneliness and danger, the realm of Satan.

The very Spirit who came upon Him at His baptism now drove Him out to the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. In this life it is impossible to escape the assault of temptation. But one thing is sure temptations are not sent to us to make us fall, they are sent to strengthen the nerve and the sinew of our minds and hearts and souls. They are not meant for harm, but for our good. They are meant to tests from which we emerge better warriors to our commitment and goals.

The development of the conception of Satan is very interesting. The word Satan in Hebrew simply means an *adversary* and in the Old Testament it is so used of human adversaries and opponents. (1.) The angel of the lord is the adversary who stands in Balaam’s way (Numbers 22:22). (2.) The Philistines fear that David may turn out to be their adversary (I Samuel 29:4). (3.) Solomon declares that God has given him such peace and prosperity that he has no adversary left to oppose him (I Kings 5:4). So the word Satan began by the meaning of adversary in the widest sense of the term.

It can also mean one who pleads a case against a person; as it is used in the first chapter of Job: when the sons of God appeared, Satan was there and his particular task was to consider men and search for some case against them so he could speak against them in the presence of God. He also has the title of Devil and this word came from the Greek *diabolos*, which literally means a slanderer, and he searches for everything that can be said against a man to deliberately and maliciously slander man in the presence of God.

To put it in a word, in this world there is God and God’s Adversary. It is almost inevitable that Satan should come to be regarded as the Adversary par excellence. In the New Testament the Devil or Satan is said to behind human disease and suffering and the Satan is the power which is against God.

Let me share the whole essence of the Temptation story. Jesus had to decide how he was to do his work. He was conscious of a tremendous task and he was also conscious of tremendous powers. God was saying to him; “Take my love to men, love them till you die for them. Conquer them by this unconquerable love even if you finish upon a cross.” God said to Jesus; “Set

up a reign of love.” Satan said to Jesus; “Set up a dictatorship of force.” Jesus had to choose that day between the way of God and the way of the Adversary of God.

Mark closes his story of the Temptation with two vivid touches: (1.) *The beasts were his companions.* Always in the desert there roams the leopard, the bear, the wild boar, and the jackal and they are always on the hunt for food. This usually adds to the grim thought of terror. But perhaps it is not so. Perhaps this is a lovely thing, for perhaps it means that the beasts were Jesus’ friends. The Jewish people always dreamed of the golden age when the Messiah would come and there would be no enmity between man and the beasts would no longer be feared. “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, and birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground” (Hosea 2:18). It may be that there, we see a picture in which the beasts recognized, before men did, their friend and the blessed King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ creator and ruler of the universe.

(2.) *The Angels were helping Him:* There are ever the divine reinforcements in the hour of trial. When Elisha and his servant were shut up in Dothan with their enemies pressing in upon them and no apparent way of escape Elisha opened the young man’s eyes and all around he saw the horses and the chariots of fire which belonged to God (2 Kings 6:17). Jesus was not left to fight his battle alone and neither are we.

When Martin Luther was asked how he overcame the Devil, he replied, “Well, when he comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks; “Who lives here? The dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, ‘Martin Luther used to live here, but he has moved out. Now I live here.’” When Christ fills our lives, Satan has no entrance.

Jesus’ experience provides us with mighty wisdom. The most important factor in fighting temptation is to be filled with the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christ is the victor over temptation and sin. His very words to us are; “Take heart! I have overcome the world.” The fullness of Christ and the Word, will make us victorious, and the angels will minister to us and meet all our needs.

Christ has not changed. He still expands lives that follow Him and following Christ is the key to the expanding life! Without belief in Him I would still be bound by the narrow sympathies of a heart that thinks only of

self and would never have had my eyes opened to the needs of the world. Today He still extends His call. It is a call to believe. Do you believe? It is a call to repent. Do you need to repent? It is a call to follow Him. Have you made this commitment?