Jesus did many things that we, his followers and disciples will never do. Walking on water, bringing the dead back to life and turning water into wine are a few that spring quickly to mind.

But, I can just as easily name two things Jesus did that most, if not all people in this sanctuary today also have done. And, they are both found in the passage from Mark’s Gospel that I just read.

One is being baptized. The other is facing temptations.

Granted, our baptisms, if we can remember it at all, most certainly lacked the drama and spectacle of what Jesus experienced when he emerged from the waters of the Jordan River.

There was no tearing apart of the heavens for *us*; no Holy Spirit descending on *us* like a dove; and no voice from heaven telling *us* that you and I were God’s beloved child.

For all that, your baptism may have more in common with Jesus’ experience, than you might think.

The splitting skies, descending doves and divine voices were vivid images the gospel writers employed to convey what Jesus experienced internally when he was baptized, more than blow by blow descriptions of what others who were there witnessed.

Jesus’ baptism marked his acceptance of and commitment to the path of ministry that God had set before him. It was a defining moment and as he entered into it he was aware of his purpose and of the Spirit’s presence with him and his Father’s love for him with crystal clarity.

While we may not have been aware of it in the same way Jesus was, the invisible reality of our baptism was that God also declared his pleasure over us and God's
Spirit became our companion. And no less than it did for Jesus, the commitment of our baptism leads us into moral wilderesses where temptations to choose personal comfort and convenience over ethical and compassionate actions, lurk like wild and cunning beasts, waiting to pounce on us.

Our battles with temptation may draw us into making choices we know are wrong. But many temptations come not in black and white, but in the gray areas where just a little rationalization or justification can be enough to nudge us in a different direction than where God wants us to go. The toughest temptations to resist tend not to be the outright wrong, but the neglecting to do the good that we could.

Whether it is Jesus being tempted or whether it is you, the essence of temptation doesn't vary. All temptation begins with casting doubt on the trustworthiness of God's word.

Lately, I’ve learned some things about -- of all things -- zebras, that shed a new light on my understanding of the connection between Jesus' baptism and his ability to resist temptations. And what that may mean for us who are baptized in Jesus' name.

Zebras share the wilderesses in which they live with all kinds of predators; from big cats, to wild dogs, to crocodiles. Zebras only self-defense against these predators is their speed, agility and the fact that they live together in herds.

So, when a zebra foal is born, one of the first things it does is stand up on its wobbly legs and run around, building up the strength and stamina needed to keep one step ahead of whatever wants to eat it. It’s as if it is born with the instinctive awareness of danger all around it, and how best to avoid it.

But, it’s the next thing a foal does after birth, that is the most fascinating.

After tiring itself out by running around and strengthening its legs, the newborn zebra lies down and for a long time just gazes at its mother. One theory proposes that the foal is actually studying the pattern of its mother's stripes.

To me, all zebras look alike. It never occurred to me that each zebra’s pattern of stripes are as unique to it, as our fingerprints are to us.
It’s possible that a newborn zebra actually memorizes its mother’s unique stripe pattern, so that when a predator strikes and the herd scatters the foal will be better equipped to pick her out in the confusion and not get separated from her.

The description of Jesus’ baptism is really painting a picture of a unifying experience between Jesus and his Heavenly Father before he was led out into the wilderness. In that moment of rising from beneath the water, his eyes beheld the tearing of the heavens and the revealing of God’s glory; his spirit felt the gentle touch of the Holy Spirit with him; his ears heard the divine voice speak the affirmation of his beloved son-ship to God.

From his baptism, Jesus entered the wilderness in the unshakable confidence of God’s presence and an unbreakable assurance of God's word that he was God’s beloved Son. When the predator struck in the form of the devil’s temptations, Jesus' focus on his Heavenly parent enabled him to resist.

Mark leaves out the details of the temptations Jesus faced, but the Gospels of Matthew and Luke fill in the blanks for us. What stands out in those accounts of the temptations Jesus faced is that he wasn’t tempted to do things that were horrendously wrong in themselves. They were not temptations to break the law or the commandments. They didn't hurt anybody. But they were all ways of getting Jesus to trust in someone or something other than God to get his needs met.

The devil coaxes Jesus with rationalizations like these:

“Jesus, why go hungry out here in the wilderness when you know you could just turn one of the stones on the ground into a loaf of bread to eat?”

“Jesus, why work so hard at convincing people that you are the Messiah when you could use your power to do some superhuman stunt to win them all over in an instant?”

“Jesus, I’ll deliver the whole world at your feet without you having to lift a finger. All you have to do is worship me.”

But, Jesus wouldn’t fall for any of it, because his Father’s words, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” were imprinted in his heart. Just as clearly as the mother zebra’s stripes are imprinted in the mind of her foal.
There’s one more feature of Mark’s version of the stories of Jesus’ baptism and temptations that separates it from Matthew and Luke’s ways of telling them. Mark doesn’t explicitly inform us how the battle of wills between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness got resolved.

He jumps right from telling us that Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, to Jesus returning to Galilee where he began preaching that the kingdom of God had come near and urging people to repent and believe in the good news.

And yet, in his usual understated manner, Mark does reveal the outcome of the temptations story, when he points out that just before Jesus begins his ministry of preaching, John the Baptist was arrested for preaching that very same message.

Which tells us that Jesus emerged from his forty days in the wilderness equipped to choose the dangerous path of proclaiming God’s good news to the world rather than giving in to the temptation to avoid the hardships and dangers that came with it.

Lent is the season when we are invited to examine our relationship to Jesus; when we are encouraged to be mindful of and resist the temptations which bedevil us. And, to confess the temptations that have led us away from God’s will for our lives and into sin.

Lent is a time to become as familiar with the grace and love of Jesus as the foal familiarizes itself with its mother’s pattern of stripes, so that we don’t lose sight of Jesus in the herd of false promises and rationalizations that tempt us to abandon our confidence and faith in him.

We can’t literally gaze into the face of Jesus; the way a new born zebra studies its mother’s stripes. But here’s something we can do. We can imprint upon our hearts the pattern by which he resisted temptation. Which was not by force of will, but of intimate relationship with God.

We can imprint within us the message he preached and the ways he embodied that message in the life he lived for others, and the life he gave up for us all. We can believe the good news that Jesus refused to allow himself to be tempted into abandoning, in order to spare himself from the cross.
The same good news which the 1st Letter of Peter summarizes in this sentence, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”

The same good news that a prophet named Isaiah recorded in these words which we read on Maundy Thursday when we commemorate Christ’s crucifixion: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: and with his stripes we are healed.”

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