

Tracy Daub
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Mark 1:9-15

TIMSHEL

Lent always begins with temptation. The first Sunday in Lent always has us reading the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. This year's reading from the Gospel of Mark offers the shortest account of them all, giving us none of the details we find in Matthew and Luke's versions of this story. In Matthew and Luke, we hear about the various kinds of temptations that confronted Jesus: how he was tempted to turn stones to bread, and tempted to test God by throwing himself off the top of the temple, and tempted to claim power and status for himself. But Mark's gospel gives us none of those details. All Mark tells us is that Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." That's it. I kind of like Mark's scarcity of details. In part, it leaves it up to us the reader to imagine for ourselves the kinds of temptations that Jesus might have confronted. But also maybe Mark leaves out the details because maybe the details don't matter so much. Maybe it doesn't matter *which* temptations Jesus confronted because underlying all temptations, yours or mine or Jesus', lies the same struggle, a common struggle.

The great American writer John Steinbeck wrote in his acclaimed novel *East of Eden*, "I believe there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us . . . Humans are caught--in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too--in a net of good and evil." He added, "We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil."

This contest between good and evil is what Jesus was wrestling with out there in the wilderness. The details are immaterial. This contest takes different forms and shapes, different

scopes and sizes, but it is the same story you and I encounter in our lives, the same contest we contend with, the same one Jesus encountered. The struggle between good and evil.

We think we know what evil looks like. It looks like someone walking into a school and killing 17 people--*that's* evil. And it is. But this temptation we face between good and evil can often come in other unassuming packages. The temptations we are speaking about are not really about whether we eat that last piece of cake or manage to resist the chocolates sitting in a dish on our co-worker's desk. Of course, such sorts of over-indulgences could point to ways we may not care for our bodies or ways in which we turn to substitutes for comfort. The deeper temptations between good and evil are both individual as well as communal: how we treat the people in our lives, and how we treat the stranger, how we speak or act in ways that may harm or help, how we use our money and our talents and resources, what we do with our lives, whether we work to forgive and reconcile or harbor grudges, the lifestyles we adopt and how this impacts the other people and creatures of the world, what policies we support and whether they benefit only us or cause harm to more vulnerable populations. We face such choice all the time, even daily, and the temptations they place before us. Good or evil.

That is the temptation Jesus faced out there in the wilderness. Still dripping wet from his baptism, with the voice of God still ringing in his ears, "You are my Son, the beloved," Jesus wrestled with what John Steinbeck calls "the only story in the world," the one that frightens us and inspires us: the contest between good and evil. What choice would Jesus make? What path would he take?

Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* is considered a literary masterpiece. It is a modern retelling of the Genesis story of Cain and Abel. You may recall that story: how Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve. And how in a fit of jealousy, Cain kills his brother Abel.

Steinbeck's novel takes place in the Salinas Valley of California and it is a multi-generational saga of the Trask family, specifically focusing on Adam Trask and his two sons. But really, really it is a story about us all, the descendants of Cain. The novel's central theme turns on the translation of a Hebrew word, the word *timshel*. And this theme explicitly surfaces in a conversation between Adam Trask, his Chinese servant Lee, and their good friend Samuel. These three men are discussing the biblical story of Cain and Abel. It is a story they have wrestled with before. They are bothered by parts of this story: how God accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's offering, thus stirring the jealousy that prompts Cain to kill his brother. This evening, however, Lee shares that he has made a discovery in the story. Lee found discrepancies in the biblical translations of a section of this story. After God rejects Cain's offering and Cain is mad, God asks Cain why he is angry. God says, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but *you shall* rule over it." Lee noticed how in the King James version the translation said that Cain "shall rule" over sin-- like it was a promise that Cain would conquer sin. But when he consulted the American Standard Bible he found this other translation, "*Do thou* rule over him." This sounded more like a command to conquer sin.

These discrepancies bothered him so Lee took this dilemma to some scholarly Chinese relatives of his. And for two years they studied Hebrew so they might arrive at a real understanding of this word. Lee and his old scholar relatives felt the importance of understanding the real meaning of "thou shalt" and "do thou." And now in this part of the story, Lee triumphantly presents his discovery to his two friends Adam and Samuel, stating that after all their study they have concluded that true Hebrew meaning was "*thou mayest*. Thou mayest rule over sin." Adam and Samuel are impressed by his relentless quest to understand the Hebrew

but fail to comprehend why this translation matters so much. Lee strives to explain. "Don't you see? he cried. The American Standard translation *orders* men to triumph over sin . . . The King James translation makes a promise in 'Thou shalt,' meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*--Thou mayest--that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. For if Thou mayest--it is also true that Thou mayest not. Don't you see?"

Lee goes on to add, "There are millions in their sects and churches who feel the order, 'Do thou,' and throw their weight into obedience. And there are millions more who feel predestination in 'Thou shalt.' Nothing they may do can interfere with what will be. But 'Thou mayest'! Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice . . . It is easy out of laziness, out of weakness, to throw oneself into the lap of deity, saying, 'I couldn't help it; the way was set.' But think of the glory of the choice! That makes a man a man. A cat has no choice, a bee must make honey. There's no godliness there . . . but this--this is a ladder to climb to the stars . . . It cuts the feet from under weakness and cowardliness and laziness . . . Thou mayest."

There is indeed great beauty and glory in that word *timshel*, thou mayest. The choice we are given is a holy one. We can find more than enough examples in the world of when people choose to do evil. But that word, *timshel*, thou mayest, tells us that we are not consigned only to do evil. For God has given us a choice. We can choose the good: to forgive, to help, to respect others even our enemies, to work for justice, to be generous. We have been given the choice to bear the image of God. And when we do, when we do it is a beautiful thing.

We learn right away the choice Jesus makes. For after his forty days of wrestling with temptation, Mark tells us that "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." And everything that follows in the rest of the gospel demonstrates the good news of his choice: service, humility, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, generosity, healing, love.

Beauty arises from this choice we are given. *Timshel* means that even the most ordinary of lives, yours and mine, can become extraordinary, holy and sacred. *Timshel*, thou mayest rule over sin offers each one of us as chance to rise, or as Steinbeck states, it gives us "a ladder to climb to the stars."

There is something else beautiful about *timshel*. Inside that idea of "thou mayest triumph over sin" is a hidden gem. For when in this contest between good and evil, when we fail to choose the good and instead choose the evil, which we will, *timshel* reminds us that the choice still lies before us, as it did for Cain. Because when we mess up, even when we sink to great lows in our lives and in our behavior, *timshel*, the idea that thou mayest triumph over sin, is extended to us yet again. And so the hidden gem built into *timshel* is the ingredient of grace. Grace and the chance to do differently the next time are components of *timshel*. We are not locked in to who we have been or how we must behave. Thou mayest be part of something beautiful and good. The beautiful thing about our God is that no matter how many times or how many ways we mess up and choose the evil, hurtful, selfish thing, God's hand is extended to us with the invitation, "Thou mayest."