

Gen. 9:8–17

Ps. 25:1–10

1 Pet. 3:18–22

Mark 1:9–15

Jesus' Ministry Begins

Goal for the Session

As Jesus began his ministry in Mark 1, adults will reflect on their ministry and commit to Lenten practices.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 1:9–15

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Stanley P. Saunders

The Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Jesus is retracing the steps of Israel's history in order to rewrite her story. Whereas Israel in the wilderness stumbled and wandered for forty years in sin, rebellion, and distrust, longing again for the chains of slavery, Jesus withstands Satan's tests in the wilderness for forty days. By this means, Jesus is retracing Israel's steps, rewriting her story, and recasting the destiny of all of God's people. Jesus' first declaration of the gospel, after the temptation in the wilderness, says as much: he announces that the time has been made full, and God's rule has come near.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Marilyn McCord Adams

Implicitly, Mark's Gospel also makes Lent the norm for Christian life. However it may have been for Jesus, resolution for us cannot be “once and for all” immediate, but a matter of surrendering our imperfect conceptions and wrestling for God's meaning afresh every day. These spiritual gymnastics strengthen us for major trials by deepening our acquaintance with the God who calls us. Things may go so badly for us that we lose sight of divine favor. Jesus' regular prayed *experience* of divine favor enabled him to remain resolute, even when he consciously wondered whether God had abandoned him (15:34).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Rodney J. Hunter

Especially during the season of Lent, shall we not also then be prepared to bear the cost of our divine name and mission as Jesus' disciples, in the confident hope of our ultimate divine affirmation in the resurrection power and love of God? “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God . . . When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:14, 15c–17).

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

Though Christian tradition holds that he was without sin, Jesus freely chose John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (practicing what he was about to preach). When the voice from heaven told him who he was, he attached no privilege to that announcement of divine favor. When the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, he did not seek a way out. The Beloved Son accepted the company God gave him in the desert—Satan, wild animals, ministering angels—with no drama of preferring one to the other. Here is someone who wastes no time defending himself against what comes to him, knowing that everything comes from God. Here is someone who shows us what it means to please God.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:9–15

Focus on Your Teaching

The season of Lent has begun. For centuries, the Christian church has set aside this period of forty days as a time for believers to reflect upon their lives as disciples of Jesus Christ and on their relationship with God. Unfortunately, the demands of life frequently wash over this season and it passes by unnoticed. This session's focus on the beginning of Jesus' ministry is an ideal opportunity to remind the participants of the importance and potential of Lent in their walks of faith.

My Lord, you have made me your own. May I be authentic in my response to your love and grace. May my words and actions bring honor to you. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- six candles
- Bibles
- pens
- paper
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for February 28, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: pens, paper
- option 2: construction paper, colored markers, art supplies
- option 3: newsprint, marker, pens, paper

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange six candles on a table in the shape of a cross. If using option 2 in Responding, cut the pieces of construction paper into the approximate size of a bumper sticker. If using option 3, prepare a piece of newsprint with the questions to post during the activity.

Welcome participants and introduce any visitors.

Remind participants that today begins the six weeks of Lent. Briefly invite participants to tell how they have observed Lent during their lives and how your church observes it in worship. Lent is observed differently by the various branches of Christianity. Some religious traditions ignore it, while others make it a significant part of the church year. The participants will probably reflect these differences. Inform them that today's session will focus on a traditional Lenten reading—the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This is a life calling in which all Christians are invited to participate and continue.

Light all six candles representing the weeks of Lent, a time of reflection and repentance in preparation for Easter. In contrast to the Advent practice of lighting one additional candle each Sunday to represent the gradual movement from darkness to light, you will light all six candles, then extinguish an additional candle every week until all six are dark.

Sit in silence for a few moments, then extinguish one candle.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Loving Lord, we come before you with quiet, reflective hearts asking that you might speak to us, enlighten us, encourage us, and empower us so that our lives might reflect your light and honor you. Amen.

The desert wilderness was not a place of escape, nor was it seen as a site for reflection. The wilderness was understood to be a place for battle where people confronted Satan, demons, and wild beasts.

EXPLORING

Explain that today's focus scripture reports three activities. Have three volunteers each read one of the three sections of the focus scripture, Mark 1:9–15 (vv. 9–11, vv. 12–13, and vv. 14–15).

Distribute pens and paper. Ask the participants to title or summarize each of the three events in headlines of no more than four words. After a few minutes ask for volunteers to read their headlines. Possible answers might be: "Jesus' baptism," "Jesus tempted in wilderness," and "Jesus begins preaching."

Form three groups and tell them they will read and compare today's focus scripture with stories about the beginning of Jesus' ministry found in the other three Gospels. Assign one of the Gospel stories to each of the groups for them to compare with Mark 1:9–15. They are Matthew 3:13–4:17, Luke 3:12–22 and 4:1–15, and John 1:29–34. Have them read the assigned verses and today's focus scripture again. Tell them to note any differences between the two Gospel readings and how Jesus is portrayed in each of them.

After the groups have had time to complete their assignments, ask them to report their findings. When all have had an opportunity to respond, ask:

- ✪ Why do you think the writers felt it was necessary to include these stories about Jesus in their Gospels?
- ✪ Based on your comparisons, what do you see is the core message Mark is conveying to his readers?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 1:9–15). Have a volunteer read the "Now What?" excerpt. Ask the participants to identify aspects of Jesus and his ministry that the disciples should strive to follow.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Common Lenten Disciplines) and have volunteers read each discipline and its description aloud to the group. After each discipline is read, have participants identify which of the three aspects of today's focus scripture, if any, are found in the discipline (e.g., baptism, resisting temptation, proclamation).

Invite people to call out any additional Lenten disciplines they know and have participants add them to the list on the resource sheet if they desire. Finally, ask participants to each choose one Lenten discipline they would like to focus on during this season of Lent.

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

1. **Prayer Groups** One of the greatest things Christians can do for one another is to pray for each other. Form small groups of two to four people to create a prayer group during Lent. Tell the members of the groups that they are prayer partners with each other. Inform them that they are to be prayer partners at least for the coming week, but encourage them to continue as prayer partners for the season of Lent. Distribute pens

For those interested in learning more about spiritual disciplines, *Soulfeast* by Marjorie Thompson is a helpful book that describes the spiritual life.

and paper. Have the participants share with the other members of their group what they need in order to follow their Lenten discipline and other prayer requests, while their prayer partners record their requests. Invite the participants to share contact information, if appropriate. Ask the participants to conclude their group times with prayer.

- 2. Lenten Bumper Stickers** Experts have noted that making one's commitment to an action known to other people increases one's resolve and the likelihood of carrying through with that action. Inform the participants that they will have the opportunity to create a bumper sticker naming the Lenten discipline they have chosen. The bumper sticker will serve as a reminder to them and a declaration of their intent to other people. Gather the participants around the craft table and have each person select a piece of construction paper and make a bumper sticker. When they are finished, have the participants display their creations. Challenge them to place their bumper stickers in a place where they will see them regularly during Lent as a reminder to practice.
- 3. Make a Plan** Post a piece of newsprint titled "My Lenten Plan" where all can see. Under the title write the following bulleted statements and questions:
 - ✿ My Lenten Discipline
 - ✿ How often will I practice it?
 - ✿ What questions do I have?
 - ✿ Who will I talk to about the practice?
 - ✿ Write a prayer to help you keep your discipline.

Distribute paper and pens and ask participants to take a few minutes to answer the statements and questions on the newsprint. Tell them this will be a reminder to them during Lent of the practice they have selected and what they have committed to. After people have filled out their papers, ask volunteers to tell what discipline they will practice. Encourage them to keep this paper close to them during Lent. Offer a short prayer for all participants that this activity will help them in their faith walk with God.

CLOSING

Have each person tell the group a significant idea he or she learned during the exploration of Mark 1:9–15. When everyone has had an opportunity to speak, gather the group into a circle for prayer.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

God Most High, thank you for your love, strength, and grace. Empower us as we begin our Lenten journeys, so that we may be drawn closer to you and our lives reflect your glory. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for February 28, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

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Common Spiritual Disciplines

Fasting or Self-Denial

Traditionally, Christians have given up a meal or a specific food during Lent. This practice of self-denial has grown to include giving up other things that give pleasure, such as shopping for nonessential items, going on trips, or watching television.

Increased Prayer

Christians always pray but increased prayer and trying different practices of prayer are common during Lent.

Almsgiving or Service

Traditionally, Christians have increased charitable giving during Lent. Many churches participate in special offerings during Lent. Voluntary service to others is another way of giving.

Bible Study

Increased study of the Scriptures or theological ideas or doctrines is a Lenten practice. Included in this discipline is setting aside time each day for devotional reading.