

AN OPPORTUNE TIME

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 21, 2010

Scripture: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

Lent begins today with a story of temptation, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. It is a powerful story of testing, and will, determination and courage. Jesus is led by the Spirit, Luke tells us, into the wilderness. Only fools, thieves, and jackals go into the wilderness... and the Son of Man. It is not a fit place to go. I have been there, where there is not much save danger.

You would think that it would be all dunes and scrub brush, sand and silence. And it is that, but it is more as well. The *sound* of the wilderness is the wind, and the *sensation* of the wilderness is the peppering of the sand in your face. The sun burns your skin, and the heat is tortuous. You live for shade and there is no food save what you have brought. Maybe you come across a stream, a wadi, or maybe you don't. And maybe you find an oasis, or maybe you don't.

Forty days Jesus hung out there in the wilderness with the sound of the wind in his ears, and the sand pelting his face, and the haunting of eerie thoughts in his mind.

Hungry, he did not eat. Thirsty, he did not drink, not much. No wonder the devil found him good pickings; like a crow looking for carrion, or a vulture circling above.

Three temptations were placed in front of him, like some dream sequence from a Fellini or Bergman movie, only violent and dangerous, not dreamy or clownish. This was the real stuff of soul searching and refining in the fire. A time when Jesus truly sweat like great drops of blood; a time like that which he would describe to Peter, when he said, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail..."¹

They were classic temptations, those choices Satan placed before Jesus, the threefold Hellenistic categories of vice: love of pleasure, love of possessions, and love of glory.²

He could have had it all. All the power, fame, and glory anyone might ever want, even the power to do good, to be like God, if only he would reach for the Tempter's hand.

Sometimes the temptations of life are like that, enticing, appetizing, appealing. Sometimes the choices are the easy wrong against the difficult right. And sometimes, perhaps most often, the choices we have are not so much between good and evil, but between good and good.

William Sloane Coffin has written,

There is in this world an element of tragedy in choice. We are asked to choose not only between good and evil but between goods, and to follow a great good means the sacrifice of lesser ones. But sacrifice can be

beautiful if we understand both the greater good and the beauty of the thing sacrificed. What is so terrible is to scorn pleasure in the way pleasure is so often scorned by sourpuss, austere ascetics. But it is a very different thing gently to lay aside a pleasure recognizing that a lot of things have gently to be laid aside in this world if we are to seek the pearl of great price.³

The choices Jesus made were choices between good things, not patently evil and patently good. If he could turn stones to bread, he could feed the world. If he could claim authority over all the kingdoms of the world what a better world this would be, better governed, better led, more peaceful, more just. If he could demonstrate his power and miraculous ability, throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, all the world would look to him and recognize his greatness. But of course, each of these would serve self more than God, and Jesus couldn't do that, could he?

Because love does not seek its own gain. Love sacrifices itself for the other. That is, in fact, the very nature of what love is. The good of one's own self set aside for the sake of the beloved.

In Luke's version there is an ominous ending to the story of the temptations in the wilderness. A minor chord that is struck. A *Liebested* that recurs and echoes throughout the rest of the gospel. "When the devil had finished every test," Luke says, "he departed from Jesus *until an opportune time.*" An opportune time. An ominous suggestion.

Matthew, unlike Luke, ends his account of the temptations by saying that the devil left Jesus, and the angels came and waited upon him. You get the picture of a squadron of heavenly EMT's who gather around Jesus, hover over him, protect him, dabbing his sores with warm water and antiseptics, binding his wounds, lifting his head in their arms, giving him sips of water to slake his thirst. A bit like the trainers in a prize fight who dab the wounds with a styptic pencil, tape the worst of them, and offer a swig of water so that the fighter can re-enter the ring refreshed.

In contrast, Luke says, "The devil left him until an opportune time." And that time of course came, in the dark days toward the end, in Judas' betrayal, in the sifting of the disciples' souls, and on the Mount of Olives when he prayed that his cup might pass. It came in the garden when an apostle drew a sword and cut off the ear of a guard, inviting violence; and it came on the cross when the crowds and soldiers mocked Jesus tempting him to come down from there and prove that he was the Messiah.

But none of that was worthy of him. None of that was meant to be. There was too much at stake.

In the early church and in the time of Jesus there was perhaps a stronger sense of the immediacy of temptation and the danger of it to supplant the larger intentions of a life. We reduce temptation to trivial things, to the desire for sweets or a lust for chocolate. We make of Lent a season for losing weight which is not exactly what fasting is meant to be. These self-serving minor sacrifices are not the heart of resisting

temptation. Temptation is a weightier issue. Because the heart of the issue of temptation is fear, our fear of hunger, our fear of running out, our fear of the future, our fear that only we can help ourselves and we are overwhelmed, our fear that we are dying, our fear of death itself.

If you think of the temptations that Jesus endured, the heart of them all is the suggestion that death has more power than God and we are left here to fend for ourselves against overwhelming odds.

Our suspicion is that God doesn't have any real power in this world, and if that's so, then we're on our own and we really do have something to fear.

John Buchanan, pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago tells a story about attending a seminar led by Walter Brueggemann, the noted Old Testament scholar. Buchanan said that as the lecture began he got out his paper and pen to take notes on what he thought would be a scholarly lecture.

But instead, Buchanan says, Brueggemann told everyone to put away their notepads and pens, and close their eyes

...and recall a time when, as a young child, [you] were frightened, lying in bed at night, sure that the shadows on the bedroom wall were of a burglar at the window, or a monster, and the bumps and creaks on the stairway surely a warning of something horrible about to happen. And you called out to your mother or father out of the darkness, in your fear, who appeared and took you in his or her arms and said, "It's OK. Everything is all right, I'm here. Don't be afraid."

That, Brueggemann said, is the fundamental, primary, and consistent message of the Bible: "I'm here. Don't be afraid."⁴

It's inherently human to be afraid. We learn it early on, not only in the house late at night with the creaks on the stairway or the bumps downstairs that wake us. We fear heights and public speaking and singing solos and taking exams. We fear bugs and snakes and ominous strangers on lonely streets. And we marvel at people who aren't afraid.

Many of our fears are learned. My brother was always great with the monster threats when we were kids. I can still see him coming at me with his hands over his head warning "I'm gonna get you!" And others of our fears are innate, like the fear of abandonment. If you don't think that's true, just watch some of these kids today who will be baptized as they leave their mother's arms to be placed in the arms of a black robed gray haired person with a strange tie on who wants to put water on their head!

No, the Tempter knew how to play Jesus, how to threaten him with the fears that get us all now and then. The fear of not having enough, the fear that our life is insignificant, the fear of death itself. Temptation at its heart promises to stave off those fears, to substitute something proximate in the place of something ultimate. The problem

is that whatever is offered as the short term solution is nothing short of sugar, and we will crave even more in the end, because nothing short of God can really satisfy what we most need which is to not be afraid.

In the 91st Psalm the psalmist writes, "...he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday."

How is it Walter Brueggemann put it? "...the fundamental, primary, and consistent message of the Bible: 'I'm here. Don't be afraid.'" It was the message of the angel to Mary at the news of her pregnancy, "Do not be afraid." The message of the angels at the empty tomb on Easter morning, "Do not be afraid." The message of the risen Lord as he comes to his disciples and urges them back to faith, "Do not be afraid."

It is precisely that that is the victory in the wilderness, the affirmation of Jesus' resistance to the Tempter, not to fall for his tricks nor to settle for his lesser options, but to not be afraid, to trust in God, to live in confidence.

What is the terror in the night, the creaking on the stairs, if not the fear of death itself? And what we remember as we begin these Lenten days is that it is precisely Jesus' trust in God that bears him up through all the trials he will face. It is our trust in God that will bear us up as well.

Peter Gomes says that "fear, not sin, is the curse on human life, and that when Jesus Christ frees you from your fear, your fear of death, you are literally given your life back."

There were occasions in Jesus life when he quoted scripture. A phrase here and there that sustained him. Words from the law and the prophets. And psalms as well, even on the cross, he quoted a psalm. And so I wonder if among the thoughts that circled in Jesus' mind out there with the sun beating on him and the sand blowing in his face and the sweat pouring off his brow were the words of the 91st psalm, "...he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge. You will not fear the terror of the night ...or the destruction that wastes at noonday."

If the heart of the Christian message is "Do not be afraid," then that is both the beginning and the ending of our Lenten days and our constant assurance in every season of life. In life and in death we belong to God, whatever the trial, whatever the temptation, whatever the fear.

So do not be afraid.

Don't be afraid of the terror of the night and don't be afraid of terrorists.

Don't be afraid of the future, or of the new job, or of leaving the old job.

Don't be afraid of the end of the relationship, or the beginning of the new one.

Don't be afraid of the move to the new home.

Don't be afraid of retiring, as if it were the end of life.

Do not fear failing, and do not be afraid of the sickness or the surgery or even of death itself.⁵

Do not be afraid.

The confidence of the psalmist, the assurance of Jesus, the promise of God is that in life and in death we are not alone.

God has taken us under his wings, and covered us with his pinions. In the shadow of the cross Jesus' outstretched arms give us shade from the heat of the day, and protect us through the shadows of the night so that we are his forever.

The fundamental, primary, and consistent promise of God to us is, "I'm here. Do not be afraid."

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¹ Luke 22:31

² Luke Timothy Johnson, **The Gospel of Luke**. Sacra Pagina Series, Vol 3, ed. Daniel Harrington. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991. 76.

³ William Sloane Coffin, **Credo**. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. 124.

⁴ John Buchanan, You Will Not Fear, sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, February 25, 2007.

⁵ Paraphrase of Buchanan's listing of fears.