

Hespeler, 10 March, 2019 © Scott McAndless – 1st Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. And on the first Sunday in Lent, if you follow the lectionary, which we have chosen to do this year at St. Andrew's Hespeler, you always read the same story from the gospels. You read the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert.

That can be a bit of a problem for a preacher like me, reading the same story each year at the same time. I mean, who likes reruns? It is one reason why I decided, several years ago, to set aside the lectionary for a time and exercise my freedom to choose the passages that I felt God was calling me to preach on each Sunday, even during Lent. That was fine and one way to deal with it, but I am finding it kind of interesting this year to come back to the lectionary and to live within that discipline of visiting the same old familiar stories. There is a value and even a power in repetition.

So today I find myself looking at this familiar story and asking myself what is special and what is unique about the way that the Gospel of Luke chooses to tell this story. And the answer to that question, honestly, is not that much. Luke's account of the temptation in the wilderness is almost identical to Matthew's.

But there is one difference in the way that Luke tells the story. And actually it is a key difference that you have to notice when you compare Matthew and Luke. It is the last phrase. Luke, and Luke alone, ends his account of the temptation in the wilderness with these specific words: **“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”**

Now, when you end a story like that, you immediately make your readers ask a question, don't you? You read that, and you have to ask the question when? When will be that opportune time when the devil steps back into the story of Jesus? That's going to be a particularly meaningful moment, isn't it? And so, as you continue to read the Gospel of Luke from this point on, you should be looking for the devil to reappear. That will be the indication that the “opportune time” has come. And, guess what? The devil does not reappear as a character in the Gospel of Luke throughout the entire ministry of Jesus. Jesus does it all, the preaching, the miracles, the incredible parables, and never once does the devil show up in the narrative.

He does not step into the story again until 18 chapters later in Chapter 22, verse 3: **“Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them.”** Oh yes, it seems that the devil has



finally found his opportune time and the opportune person through whom to carry out his design.

That is the way that Luke chooses to tell his story of the ministry of Jesus. It is bookended by the action of the devil, who is active in the temptation at the beginning and is active through the passion at the end, but the middle – the entire ministry of Jesus – rolls out in a devil-free zone. Now, why does Luke choose to tell the story in that way?

I believe that it is symbolic. Luke is trying to teach us about creating the kind of ministry that Jesus had – the kind of ministry that transforms the world, because that's why he wrote this Gospel, to teach us how to do exactly that. That gives the story of Jesus in the desert particular significance. Jesus clearly has to go through that ordeal; he is led there by the Holy Spirit. The message seems to be that the decisions that he makes in the desert are all about setting Jesus up to have the kind of effective ministry that he has been called to have. By dealing with all of the temptations that may arise and lead his ministry astray in the desert, Jesus effectively banishes the devil from interfering throughout his earthly ministry.

And surely that is also a lesson for us. The things that tempted Jesus in the desert, the things that he rejected, will surely be the very things that will easily derail our ministry; we are being warned against them. So let us take a look at those three temptations in the desert. Is there some way in which the church today find itself facing the same temptations, though perhaps in somewhat different form?

The first temptation is fairly straightforward. After fasting for many days, Jesus is understandably hungry and is tempted to use his power to provide bread for sustenance. Now, what is wrong with doing that? When the devil tells Jesus that he has the power to provide bread for himself, he is surely not lying. If Jesus is who he says he is, he must have such power. What's more, we are told in the same Gospel that Jesus actually did a very similar thing. He had four thousand people in a secluded place, five thousand on another occasion, and yet bread and even fish were miraculously provided at Jesus' command. He provided bread then, what's wrong with doing it now?

The answer, I suspect, has nothing to do with *how* the bread is provided, but rather the question of for whom. Jesus might provide bread for others by such means, but he will not provide it for himself. He justifies this refusal by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, "**one does not live by bread alone.**" That quote comes from a longer passage where Moses is talking about God's provision for the people of Israel and how God gave them manna to eat while they wandered in the desert. The meaning seems to be that God did this as a way of teaching them that they should trust in God first, and not in their ability to provide for themselves.

So how do we take this temptation and apply it to the life of the church today. I believe that the same power offered to Jesus is still available to the church today. We are given the ability to produce sustenance. Oh, we may not

do it in as powerful a way as Jesus did it with the five thousand in the wilderness. We certainly don't produce bread out of stones. But I have seen that miracle occur in this place. It has occurred when enough food to produce one of our famous Thursday Night Supper and Socials just appeared when it is needed most – when somebody maybe dropped off some food that they didn't need or gave generously in another way.

I've seen the same miracle happen (though not with food) in the Hope Clothing room when someone has come in with a particular need for a certain item and we discover that the perfect item had been dropped off minutes earlier by some random donor. That kind of things happens once or twice and you just sort of shrug your shoulders and say, "That's quite a coincidence." But when it keeps happening, you start to suspect that something special is going on.

So, I absolutely believe that God can provide bread and other basic needs in stunning ways. Jesus trusted in that too. The temptation in the desert, however, is all about taking that awesome power that God has bestowed upon us and using it merely to take care of our own needs. That is not why that power is given. And this is frankly a temptation that the church often gives into.

Whenever we start to feel that resources are getting scarce in the church – when we are going through a desert experience – churches always seem to retract – to say that we cannot be involved in ministry to others because we have to use everything that we've got just to survive. I've seen it time and time again. When a church enters into that kind of survival mode, concentrating on bread for itself, it can so quickly lose sight of what it is meant to be. So Jesus dispenses with that temptation at the very beginning. So should the church do if we want to banish the influence of the devil from our ongoing ministry.

The second temptation that Christ faces in the desert is also one that the church continues to face today. The devil offers Jesus power and influence over the authorities of this world. **"Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority.'"** Can churches do that – sacrifice their mission and identity in the quest for political power and influence? Absolutely! The most powerful demonstration of that temptation we've seen in recent times is the powerful alliance that has been made between the white Evangelical Church and the Republican Party in the United States. They seem to have pledged near unconditional support in the quest to achieve certain policy and judicial goals.

The problem with that is not necessarily that there is something wrong with those political goals (though I realize, of course, that not every Christian would agree with their goals). The problem with that is what it does to the church – it takes us away from our true identity, our true calling. The church may see some short-term benefit, of course. Such power and influence is intoxicating. But the long-term effect will definitely be to turn people sour as they recognize the cynicism with which the church interacts with the world. We are willing to set

aside what matters most for the sake of gain in this world. **“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”** (Mark 8:36)

So, the first temptation seems to be about using the power that God has given us to merely take care of our own needs. The second one is about using our power and position to gain political influence. I think you can already see a pattern here; it is all about taking care of ourselves first as a church and as a Christian movement. I think you will find that the third temptation takes us even further down the road.

In the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the top of the highest building anywhere in the world, and he says, **“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”** That is exactly what it sounds like: an invitation to commit very public suicide. Now, you may ask, how would that be something at all tempting to the church today? We are just trying to survive as an institution, why would we be attracted to suicide?

But, of course, it’s not actual suicide that the devil is talking about. He wants Jesus to put himself in such a position precisely so that God might save him. In other words, he wants Jesus to make it all about nothing but his own survival. And that is something that I see churches doing a lot these days. Churches are scared, I know that. The world has changed and the place of the church in it is no longer as clear as it once was. When things get desperate, there is this temptation that churches find themselves dealing with. They decide that it is all about survival. The only purpose of the church becomes the continued existence of the church. We are so busy with survival that there is nothing left for ministry, mission, learning or growth in grace.

It is just like what happens when someone flings themselves from the top of a high building. In that moment every other concern is reduced to one question: will I survive or will I not. Churches go into that mode and they pray and expect that God will save them. And the issue at that point is not whether or not God *can* save them. The issue is not even whether or not God *will* save them. The issue is that we are testing God by once again making it all about us and our survival instead of questions about what God has called us to do and be in the world.

The temptations of Christ in the wilderness are not just about Jesus and what he had to deal with for our sakes. They are about us and the real issues that we continue to face. They are about banishing the devil – this very influence of evil upon the lives of our churches – so that we might get on with the business of becoming what we were called to be.