



“Resist!”

Scripture – Matthew 4:1-11

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, March 1, 2020

We launched our Lenten journey on Wednesday evening, many of us having ashes rubbed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. Some of you may still have the Biblical phrase we uttered ringing in your ears: “From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return.” It signals one of the places where the church and our culture part ways. While society worships youthfulness, and I swear every other commercial touts the pill that will keep you in the game, the church reminds us that our time on earth has an ending point and it may be sooner than we imagine. The right meds, diet, physical exercise and spiritual practices may prolong our journey a bit, but each one of us is still approaching a stop sign.

The black ashes on our body not only reminded us of our mortality, they marked the start of our 40 day inward journey. This is the time when we reflect on who Jesus is and we drill down deeply into who we are.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we rewind the story of Jesus back to the beginning of his ministry. He has not begun to teach, he has yet to heal a single person, and he has not even called anyone to become a follower. Our gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent takes place immediately after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and heard a voice say, “This is my Son the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

After his baptism, Jesus trekked into the barren and rocky wilderness where food and water were scarce, where shade and protection were rare, and where people were absent. He was led by the Spirit into a desolate place to spend 40 days in prayer and reflection, and when the time was up; when Jesus was worn out and hungry, weak and vulnerable, another spirit surfaced. And the battle was on. Satan thought he could derail the ministry of Jesus before he had pulled out of the station.

It is important for us to clear up a couple of matters before we proceed. First, if you believe that Jesus was not fully human, then you probably cannot see how this story relates to your life. If Jesus did not experience the same desires and needs and temptations we do, then this scene is all about Jesus and his super hero power. The devil would present a temptation and Jesus would brush him off with a flick of his wrist: “Get a life!” And the story would have nothing to do with us.

However, the gospel writers portray Jesus as facing genuine temptation not unlike ourselves. They point out that the tempter shows up when Jesus is weak and hungry. In other words, fully human. For the story to resonate with our own experience, it is important to realize that Jesus’ humanity made him susceptible to temptation. He had the freedom to choose. Even though he had heard God name him as a beloved Son, it was still possible to fail this test. Would he live into the person God wanted him to become?

The other matter we need to address is the devil. While people in the ancient world personified evil, it is not essential for people of faith today to believe in a literal devil – a pitchfork yielding demon who was the adversary of the one true loving and benevolent Creator. However, we would never try to dismiss evil as fantasy. All of us are more than aware of the evil that stalks our planet devouring lives and provoking suffering.

Our story indicates that the enemy appeared to Jesus when he was fragile. He had been fasting for 40 days and the evil one saw an opening. What should be an easy enticement? “Jesus, you must be famished, why don’t you turn these stones into some freshly baked pita bread? I can almost smell the aroma.”

Jesus resists the tantalizing suggestion saying, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Let’s think about that. What is so wrong with Jesus turning a few rocks into tasty nourishment? Certainly, no one would miss a few desert rocks. All creatures need food. However, during his time in the wilderness, Jesus becomes aware of a deeper hunger in the human soul that cannot be satisfied with a Full English Breakfast. You and I know there is a deeper hunger for a meaningful life and to become the person God wants you to become.

Our story says that the adversary presents Jesus with three temptations and it is readily apparent that Jesus is not tempted to do something that is obviously evil. He is not tempted to steal from the temple treasury. In fact, the temptations have a luster to them. Who would be hurt if he turned stones into bread? Wouldn’t he attract a multitude of followers if he demonstrated God’s power to keep him safe after a death-defying leap from the pinnacle of the temple? And why wouldn’t Jesus want the power to rule over all the kingdoms of the world? Imagine the enormous good he could accomplish with that kind of authority.

But, this story is not intended to be held at arm’s length. We are supposed to step into this story and make it our own. That is not to say that we are to imagine a sinister character with horns; but rather to consider the nature of temptation. It is not always obvious. Temptations can be very attractive. That is why evil can be such a formidable force to resist. It is why we can be lured into doing things we ought not do. The darkness appears to be light. The bad takes the shape of good. What can be harmful looks harmless.

When has temptation ever worked its cunning on you? When you became envious of someone else’s life? When you were wary of someone from another religion? When you fall for the line that possessions will make you happy? When you believe you should be in control of every situation?

A malevolent spirit entices some to heinous acts such as desecrating a Jewish cemetery or burning a mosque or opening fire in a crowd. But for most of us, evil works in far more subtle ways.

We reject temptations to do others harm, but settle into a comfortable apathy toward the troubles of others. *Indifference* is surely one of the most prevalent temptations nipping at our heels. We observe hunger and hear a voice whisper that the problem is too complicated and so we do nothing. We encounter injustice but talk ourselves out of joining the fray to right what is wrong. We witness racism and shake our heads about how shameful it is, but do nothing to combat it.

Where do you encounter the adversary who hurls temptations your way? Are you tempted to turn your back on someone who made you angry? Might you belittle someone because you think it makes you taller? Someone said, “Opportunity may only knock once, but temptation leans on the doorbell.”

What temptations do you face? I’m hesitant to guess, because like a colleague says, “only you know what devils have your number, and what bribes they use to get you to pick up.”¹

Living in a culture that promotes ease and comfort, a spiritual struggle sounds like something to avoid at all costs. Won't facing our shortcomings bring us down? Not when we have the assurance that God forgives us, and gives us the will and the wisdom to defeat temptation, and to embark on a life-giving path.

God's Spirit led Jesus into the desert because God wanted to test him. God wanted to see what Jesus was made of. Would he opt for the easy and the convenient, or would he have the courage and determination to pursue what was right no matter the effort required? Would he have the grit to go for the good despite the sacrifice?

How about you? Are you up to a match with the tempter during these weeks of Lent? Where is your weak spot he'll try to undermine?

Be on guard, because sooner or later, each of us is tested. But think of it as an opportunity – an opportunity to show what you are made of.

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Wilderness Exam," *Day1.org*, February 21, 2010.

Prayer of Great Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – in whom we live and move and have our being – from our first cries to our final breaths, we are your own. We give thanks for your boundless love and abundant grace – love that compelled you to speak into a formless void, and call forth light and life; grace that dripped from your fingertips as you molded humankind from Eden's dust.

You formed us, wonder-working God, with the care and imagination of a potter. But we have lived as imperfect creations. Time and again, we have wandered into the wilderness and lost sight of your pilgrim way. We listen to alluring voices that promise comfort and success, rather than heeding your call to compassionate service. Yet, even in our brokenness, you have never abandoned us.

With persistent love you gave us the law and sent us the prophets, and finally broke into our broken world as the Word made Flesh. Your Son came to show us the fullness of your love, and to teach us how to love more fully, so that we -- your Beloved Dust -- might also be salt of the earth and light of the world ...

We know the challenge inherent in being disciples of Jesus Christ. So we come to this table seeking strength for this Lenten journey, that we might carry the cross and follow you. Pour out your Spirit upon us, and upon these – your gifts – of bread and cup; bind us to you and to one another in ways that nourish our souls, just as this feast nourishes our bodies, so that your purpose might find fulfillment in our common life and service.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.