



“Taking a Stand”
Scripture – Matthew 4:1-11
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 5, 2017

While I cannot imagine undertaking a 40 day fast, I REALLY cannot imagine Satan showing up when I’m starving and offering my favorite Italian bread from Trader Joe’s. I am not overly frightened of heights, but I cannot imagine a demon enticing me to stand on the tip of a spire at the National Cathedral. And, I certainly cannot picture the Prince of Darkness offering me unlimited power to rule the world. So, what can we make of this story? Is it simply a mythological tale from a pre-modern era that has no relevance in our postmodern world?

It falls very early in the gospels. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River and the very next day he is drawn westward into the rugged hills of the wilderness. There, where food and water are scarce, where shade and protection are scarce, where people are scarce, Jesus engages in a spiritual struggle.

Regardless of how literally you take this story, it is not difficult to see that it is not simply about Jesus. On one level it is about Jesus working out the details of his ministry and mission. Whether it was 40 days or 40 months, I suspect Jesus spent a good deal of time focusing on what God had in mind for him. What sort of ministry would he lead? Where should he place his greatest emphasis? What should be the core teachings he leaves with his followers? Would he reiterate the joyful hymns of the Psalms, or hone in on the challenges of the Old Testament prophets?

While he is busy conducting his own personal spiritual retreat – pondering his purpose and setting out his strategy – another spirit slips onto the scene to see if Jesus can be lured off course. Our story says that the enemy 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 slit an adversary’s throat or steal from the temple treasury. The temptations are appealing. 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? And, why wouldn’t Jesus want the power to rule over all the kingdoms of the world? He could accomplish a tremendous amount of good 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 a pitch fork; but rather to consider the nature of temptation. It is not something that is always obvious. Temptations can be very attractive.

That is why evil can be such a formidable force and difficult 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 appears harmless.

I read C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* when I was in college, but many of its lessons have remained with me. Wormwood is the name of a young would-be tempter who is an apprentice to his mentor, Uncle Screwtape. Wormwood is assigned a man on earth whom he is to corrupt. His ultimate goal is to lure this human into rejecting God, but first, he must learn the subtle nature of temptation. He is to encourage the man to pray for *objects* rather than praying to God. He is to make the man overly sensitive to the remarks made about him by others. Wormwood is to gradually avert the man's gaze from God so that his focus becomes himself. "The captivating part of the story is not that Screwtape and Wormwood are trying to create an army of ruthless killers; rather they are trying to create a generation of people who are defined by selfishness and insincerity, pettiness and arrogance, fear and a need to control the things of this world."¹

When does temptation work its cunning on you? When you become envious of someone else's life? When you become wary of someone from another religion? When you believe possessions will make you happy? When you cannot corral your anger? When you believe you should be in control of every situation?

A malevolent spirit entices some to heinous acts such as bomb threats Jewish community centers and desecrating Jewish cemeteries, 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 we do nothing to combat it.

If you haven't seen the current movie, *Hidden Figures*, I encourage you to see it. It tells the long lost story of the brilliant black women who worked at NASA in the sixties and helped with the complex calculations that made it possible to launch astronauts into space and – the much more challenging issue – how to bring them back to earth safely.

Katherine Johnson, who graduated from high school at age 14 and from college at 18, was a mathematics whiz who excelled in complex algorithms. After the Russians put the first man into space, the pressure was on NASA to surpass them. Katherine Johnson was promoted to work with a room full of white men at Langley Air Force base. This was at a time when Virginia was defying court orders and enforcing segregation. They still had "White" and "Colored" drinking fountains and restrooms. How many of you remember those signs?

When Johnson assumes her new position, she finds that there is a large pot of brewed coffee for all of the white men, and a small empty pot next to it with tape across the front that read, "Colored."

She does not want to make a fuss about the indignities she must endure. She simply wants to do her job to help put American astronauts into space. She tries to keep her head down and perform the calculations that are assigned to her.

Meanwhile, the director of the space program is getting immense pressure from the White House and is focused on results. He is impressed with Katherine's skills but is irked that when she takes a break it lasts 20 minutes. What he does not realize, until one day she returns from her break soaking wet from a rainstorm, is that her new assignment has put her nearly half a mile away from the building that has the only bathroom designated for African-American women.

When the director's eyes are opened, he does something unexpected. Rather than shrugging his shoulders, he takes action. He goes to the building with the bathroom that has a sign designating it as the "Colored Ladies"

Restroom.” And while his white male engineers – in their white shirts, black ties and pocket protectors – stand on one side, and African-American women stand on the other side, he begins lashing at the sign with a crowbar.

This is no thin aluminum sign. It is steel and it is fastened to the wall with heavy bolts. He beats on the sign from one side. He beats on it from the other side. He puts the crowbar into a crack between the sign and the wall and tries to pry it off.

Like overcoming segregation itself, it is not an easy task. It requires a true struggle and dogged determination to rip that sign down. But the director will not relent, and he keeps hammering away at it. Once the sign finally crashes to the floor, he scoops it up, and as he marches off with it, he boldly declares that there can be no barriers among them. If they are to accomplish their mission, there can be no more lines of demarcation.

Had he been indifferent, darkness would have won the day once again. But he stopped Satan in his tracks by taking a stand for what was right, rather than turning his head.

Temptations regularly assail us. Some are obvious and easy to swat away, but others, such as apathy, find a way to slip under our skin with barely a notice. Remember what Edmund Burke said? “The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.”

These 40 days of Lent challenge us to become more aware of those temptations to which each of us is especially susceptible. Then, we can begin to free ourselves from their wily power.

NOTES

1. Maryetta Anschutz, “Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), p.48.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ 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 ...**”