

First Presbyterian Church, Cottonwood Falls, KS
First Sunday in Lent, Feb. 25, 2007
Meant to Be: Luke 4:1-13
Rev. Pat Ireland, Pastor

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.' "

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

¹¹ and

'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

According to the lectionary, the lesson for the First Sunday in Lent is always Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It was a test between apparent weakness and presumed power. Satan presumed that Jesus would respond powerfully to what Satan offered, but Satan mistook the meaning of God's power, and of Satan's own power as well. We who live in a world of power face the same temptation: to yield to the world's presumptions rather than remain faithful to God's intentions.

Though Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story of Jesus' temptation in essentially the same way, only Luke ends his telling with the foreboding words of verse 13, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

Let us Pray: Eternal God, guide the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts that we might resist the temptation for easy answers and listen for Your Word and will. Amen

There are several themes in the story of Jesus' temptation. There's a theme about the temptation of materialism represented appropriately by "bread"—bread made from desert stones. There's the theme of power and what power can do to people. Power is represented by the "kingdoms of the world," which the devil offers to Jesus. There's the theme of the manipulation of faith by outward miracle. In this story, the devil tempts Jesus to offer a "miracle show" in Jerusalem. He could leap from the top of the Temple to be caught by angels and win over the city by a magic act.

And of course, the devil quotes scripture, reminding us of the greatest threat of all:

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Based on: "Pausing on the Way to Jerusalem" by Michael Lindvall for the Thoughtful Christian. com

hearing, not God's voice, but the world's when we use scripture casually.

But it's the enigmatic last words of Luke's story that really fascinate. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him. . . ." And then those last four words: "until an opportune time."

According to Luke, that "opportune time" doesn't come for eighteen chapters. For eighteen chapters, Satan seems to go underground; the devil bides his time until the moment comes and only then presents Jesus with one last temptation.

Nearly twenty years ago, a Jesus movie caused a cultural stir every bit as upsetting as Mel Gibson's more recent *The Passion of the Christ* (albeit for very different reasons). This earlier film suggested the temptation that comes to Jesus at Luke's "opportune time." Controversy swirled around Martin Scorsese's filmed version of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Both the novelist and the filmmaker fictionalized the story as told in the Gospels with creatively reckless abandon.

But for all the fantasy, the "last temptation" they speculate about is consistent—though altogether speculative—with the biblical "last temptation" that comes at the "opportune time."

It comes in chapter 22 of Luke, the final night of Jesus' life, just after the Last Supper. Jesus has gone to a garden on the Mount of Olives to pray with several of his disciples. Twice he tells the disciples to pray that they may not "come into the time of trial." And then, alone, Jesus prays his way through his "last temptation." He prays that God might "remove this cup from me." The "cup" stands for the cross, of course. Jesus' last temptation is, quite simply, to avoid the cross.

He is tempted to take an easier route that skirts the horror to come. Jesus' last temptation is to take a road that would bypass the very act of sacrificial love that somehow saves us.

Both the Kazantzakis novel and the Scorsese film present this final temptation in the form of a dream: instead of the cross before him, Jesus dreams of living a long and "successful" life. The dream includes marriage to Mary Magdalene replete with passion, children, and the good life in the green hills of Galilee. Had Jesus yielded to this last temptation, had he passed by the cross, he might have become a great carpenter. He might have become a successful teacher. He might still have been an inspiration, even a venerated sage, but he would not have been the Savior.

Actually, the three temptations in the desert and this fourth temptation in the garden are variations on one theme. Each of them is a temptation to be a "success" - but in the process to forget whom he was meant to be. The devil creates doubt by saying, "If you are the son of

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God...”

In the desert, the devil tempts him with the power that would come with an endless supply of bread. He tempts him with the “kingdoms of the world,” power implicit in political position. He tempts him with the “success” that would doubtless follow a flying act off the top of the Temple. And finally, according to Kazantzakis and Scorsese, when none of that worked, the devil tempts him in the garden—“at an opportune time”—with a simpler and subtler kind of success: “Forget the cross, be a good rabbi back in Nazareth, get married, settle down, and become modestly famous for a while.”

Just as he was tempted to forget who he was and be a success, we are tempted to be a success in the eyes of the world but in the process to forget whom we are called to be. Don’t misunderstand; success can be a very good thing. Indeed, sometimes being whom you are called to be may well lead to success in the eyes of the world.

But the harder truth is this: “success” in the eyes of the world and “whom you are meant to be” are not always the same thing. In fact, sometimes they are at sharp odds with each other. The real temptation Jesus faced, the real temptation we face in a hundred subtle ways, is the temptation to be a success in the eyes of the world but at the cost of integrity. We are tempted to succeed at the price of our families, to succeed magnificently but to lose our happiness, to succeed grandly and pay for it with our souls.

Had Jesus given in to *the devil*, either in the desert or in the garden, he might have been a smashing first century success—plenty of bread, famous worker of miracles, major Judean politician, or maybe just a locally renowned rabbi-carpenter, husband, and father. All of these are credible manifestations of success, but Jesus was meant to be more. And you and I are finally meant for even more than success in the eyes of the world.

Our core human temptation is the same as the sum of the ones Jesus faced in the wilderness and on the night before his death. The eternal temptation is always to forget who you are and let the world define you, to forget who you are and let your job define you, to forget who you are and let money define you, to forget who you are and let clothes, or smarts, or looks, or addiction, or sex define you.

Baptism is about becoming the person you were created to be. Long before *The Last Temptation* became a movie, I wore a pendant that read: “Be what you were meant to be.” Of course, back then I never imagined I was meant to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament. I confess I am tempted to be more of a pastor than a prophet. I am tempted to comfort and teach more than to admonish and prod.

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Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus: “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Eph. 2:10) We were meant to be children of God. Before time began, God, who is outside of time, planned for us. God created us to be human beings made in the image of the divine. It is the divine breath that gives us life.

In Baptism and confession of faith we acknowledge who and whose we are. We publicly proclaim that we belong to God, who loves us and wants for us abundant life. And when humanity forgot how to live as human beings, God came and lived among us as a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection we have everything we need to be saved, everything we need to live in communion with the eternal God.

In the mystery and miracle of God’s love: As we are buried with Jesus in our baptism, so shall we be raised with him into new life. In our baptism we are made be dead to sin and alive to all that is good. We are called to follow Jesus into abundant life.

So today we welcome Buck home, into the family, to continue to grow and become the loving, compassionate, creative person he was meant to be. And we mark, with water Tucker, indicating our understanding that God’s promises are for our children, and our children’s children. God’s goodness is from generation to generation.

Today we recommit ourselves to walk with Buck and Tucker, following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We understand it may not be easy. We realize that temptations will come and go. We know we shall never be fully transformed in this life.

But just as we are fully human at the moment of birth, so we are fully Christian from the moment of Baptism, not because of what we do, but because of the work of the Holy Spirit. And, just as we must grow and practice, exercise and learn the skills of being fully human, so too we are expected to continue growing in faith and discipleship, trust and love until that time when God calls us to complete transformation in death and resurrection.

Lent is an opportunity to grow up, to discover and become what we were meant to be.