

LENT 1C

February 21, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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

There can be no more appropriate place for us to begin our Lenten wilderness journey together than by reading about Jesus' own wilderness journey.

The devil's first test hits Jesus at a vulnerable point – after forty days of fasting, he was famished. The devil tempts Jesus to turn a stone into bread for him to eat. Yet Jesus resists, knowing that his ultimate hunger – the need to dwell in and with God – cannot be met by physical food. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 8, verse 3: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” These verses might cause us to pause and wonder which is more important: physical hunger, or spiritual hunger?

Anyone who has watched the news or read a newspaper in the past several years knows well that the incidence of obesity in the United States is at epidemic proportions. A February 2009 report by the Centers for Disease Control states that more than 1/3 of American adults are obese.¹

Food is just one single example of the false gods we might look toward, seeking to fill that spiritual hole within us. For some the lure might be entertainment, for others it might be alcohol, or unhealthy relationships, or a whole host of other things we pursue seeking to fill that spiritual need.

Eminent preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes that spiritual hole this way:

That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole.

To enter the wilderness is to leave them behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do. For 40 days, simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving a Mars bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out.²

Many people elect to fast during Lent, either from a meal or from a particular food item. Here's a suggestion for your fast: Every time you become hungry or get a craving, remember the reason for your fast – pray instead of eating. Your appetite or craving acts as a prayer alarm. This can have immense spiritual benefits. Prayer will help keep you focused on the only one who can truly fill that hole within.

+ + +

The second temptation the devil dangled in front of Jesus in the wilderness was power. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and tells Jesus that if Jesus will worship him, then he will give Jesus dominion over all the Earth. Yet again Jesus withstands temptation by citing scripture, this time Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 13, “The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.”

As the Son of God, Jesus surely knew that all dominion would eventually be his; this was his calling in life, to vanquish the forces of evil and exercise dominion over all things to the glory of God. The temptation for Jesus was to either give in, bow before the devil, and have dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth *now*, OR trust that God’s promises to Jesus would be fulfilled, and that in the heavenly kingdom Jesus would have authority over all things. While the devil may – and I stress *may*, because his assertion of dominion over the earth may be yet another of the devil’s lies – have authority over the earth, he most certainly does not have authority over the kingdom of God. His temptation to Jesus was the lie that all that matters is the power and authority one can exercise in the here-and-now.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and prolific author, had the following to say when reflecting on the temptation of Jesus:

We can speak of a man choosing his vocation, but perhaps it is at least as accurate to speak of a vocation's choosing the man, of a call's being given and a man's hearing it, or not hearing it. And maybe that is the place to start: the business of listening and hearing. A man's life is full of all sorts of voices calling him in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which do we listen to? What kind of voice do we listen for? [p. 27]

The danger is that ... you listen to the great blaring, boring, banal voice of our mass culture, which threatens to deafen us all by blasting forth that the only thing that really matters about your work is how much it will get you in the way of salary and status, and that if it is gladness you are after, you can save that for weekends. ...

The world is full of people who seem to have listened to the wrong voice and are now engaged in life-work in which they find no pleasure or purpose and who run the risk of suddenly realizing someday that they have spent the only years that they are ever going to get in this world doing something which could not matter less to themselves or to anyone else.³ ...

We must be careful with our lives, for Christ's sake, because it would seem that they are the only lives we are going to have in this puzzling and perilous world, and so they are very precious and what we do with them matters enormously. Everybody knows that. We need no one to tell it to us. Yet in another way perhaps we do always need to be told, because there is always the temptation to believe that we have all the time in the world, whereas the truth of it is that we do not. We have only a life, and the choice of how we are going to live it must be our own choice, not one that we let the world make for us.⁴

Jesus heard and responded to the call of God. He most certainly knew that his life's calling was for the kingdom of God, and that what he did mattered enormously. When his temptation was to exercise power over the kingdoms of the world, he chose to resist the present temptation of the voice opposed to God for the greater good of all humanity. Likewise, so may we also strive to discern all the voices competing for our allegiance in this earthly kingdom, and attend only to the One whose voice ultimately matters.

+ + +

In his last attempt, the devil tempted Jesus by taking him to the top of the temple in Jerusalem. He challenged him to throw himself off the temple to prove that he is the Son of God. And yet again, Jesus responds to the temptation with scripture, from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 16. The entire verse reads: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah.”

This particular temptation for Jesus was not only a test of his faith, but also a test of the faithfulness of God. Supposedly, according to the devil, if Jesus had faith that God would be faithful to His promises, Jesus would fling himself off the top of the temple. But Jesus had even more faith than that – he had faith sufficient to believe God’s promises without putting them to the test.

The incident at Massah to which Jesus refers occurred during the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness. They began to quarrel with Moses because there was no water to drink. The Lord instructed Moses to strike a rock with his staff; fresh water for the people to drink came flowing forth. Moses called that place Massah (which means test) and Meribah (which means quarrel) “because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”⁵

How many times do we seek signs that God is among us? I can remember sitting in an adult Bible study class several years ago. One participant said something like, “Having faith is like an inoculation against bad things happening to you.” I thought, “Oh, really,” so I decided to put that logic to the test. I said, “Imagine that someone’s daughter is sick in the hospital with leukemia. You go to visit the parents. Do you tell them that if they have enough faith their child will be healed?”

“No, of course not,” this man said.

“Okay,” I said. “So do you tell them that the child should not receive medical treatment because their faith should heal her?” Again, this man said, “No.”

“And yet,” I persisted, “No one would question that something bad has happened to them. Did this happen because of their lack of faith?” “No, of course not!” the man insisted.

“So what is the function of faith in this instance?” I asked. This time, no answer from the man, or from the group. I said, “Might I suggest that if we say that a person has enough faith they will be saved from having bad things happen to them, then that is our attempt to manipulate God. We are trying to test God by saying, ‘If I only had enough faith this bad thing wouldn’t be happening to me.’” Then, if we think – in our own, flawed reasoning – that our faith is sufficient and

yet we do not see the results that we desire, that God has abandoned us. This is wrong thinking.

“Rather, our faith is such that regardless of what happens, we know that we rest in the arms of a loving God who wills that no evil befall us, even though because of the presence of sin in the world and our own free will, bad things do happen. God cannot, and will not, be manipulated. But God does mold and fashion our own hearts, so that when bad things happen, we can rest assured that God still loves and cares for us.”

+ + +

A prominent Lutheran theologian once said that, “Lent is spring training, a practice session for the rest of our lives.”⁶ At first I thought this statement a bit trivial, but as I thought about it, it began to make more sense. Baseball’s spring training is typically about 40 days long – excluding Sundays, of course! – just like Lent. During spring training the athletes practice and hone the skills they will need to make them victorious during the regular season.

Therefore, during this season of Lent, practice and hone the spiritual practices which shape and mold us for the kingdom of God. Let the spiritual “hole” that may exist in your soul be filled with the Word of God. Be assured that the powers of this world are not ultimate, but are penultimate – secondary to what truly matters, which is the kingdom of God where Jesus has ultimate dominion over all things. And finally, trust in the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul. God has made a promise to each and every one of us, and God will be faithful to that promise. We are loved and redeemed children of God! There is no need to put that promise to the test. Being ever fashioned into the likeness of God, let us always keep before us as our model and guide Jesus Christ, who struggled with temptation in the wilderness and emerged victorious, to become the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Amen.

<2,178 words>

¹ “Obesity: Halting the Epidemic by Making Health Easier” National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control, February 2009), 2. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/publications/AAG/pdf/obesity.pdf>, downloaded 2/20/10.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Settling for Less,” Christian Century, February 18, 1998, p. 169.

³ Frederick Buechner, The Hungering Dark, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

⁵ Exodus 17: 1-7

⁶ Frederick A. Niedner, “The Season of Lent” in New Proclamation Year C, 2003-2004 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 138.