

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/MARCH 7, 2010/LENT THREE

POWER/LUKE 4:1-13

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I. THE TEXT: The season of Lent – that season of the church year in which we visit the deep places of our souls and ask the difficult questions about who we are and who we one day intend to be. Keeping with church tradition, two weeks ago we began to explore the forty days that mirror Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness with the devil. Hear his story again... the word of God from Luke’s gospel...

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.

II. PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

III. TEMPTATION

Temptation has stalked humanity from the very beginning. From one perspective, the record of Scripture can be seen as one long parade of saints and sinners, most of them pretty normal, most with good intentions, each of whom struggled mightily with temptation, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing. As much as we’d like it to be otherwise, temptation is simply part of the human condition... for our ancestors in faith and for us. The difference is that their lists of temptation successes and failures made it into the public record. Generally, **our** decisions are not up for public inspection, but they are, nonetheless, significant. Now, I’m not talking about the minor battles with whether or not to eat that last piece of chocolate or hit the snooze alarm one more time – the things we usually call temptations. Rather, I’m talking about matters of character, integrity; decisions about whether we will live into what God intends; those forks in the road we come to time after time at which the fundamental question is always the same – for Jesus in the wilderness, for you and for me – will we do what is expedient? or what is right?

IV. THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

Jesus, dripping wet from his baptism... the dove descends and the heavenly voice speaks – “this is my son whom I love... with whom I am well pleased.” In that moment Jesus is launched into a divinely written job description – “he will save the people from their

sins,” the angel said some 30 years earlier. But then, rather than a baptism brunch with the family at the local deli, the Holy Spirit whisks Jesus away to the wilderness to find out what he’s made of – to sort out his life and figure out what he will do with it. Today’s scripture depicts the three temptations Jesus faced on the fortieth day of a forty-day fast.

You remember from the Sunday before last that the devil is the “one who divides” – the one who creates those forks in the road that call us to make life-determining decisions: will I take God’s path or take the road most-traveled? Jesus’ first temptation, of course, was to use his divine status for a quick-fix to his understandable hunger. Such a gift, Jesus reveals, is not for self-gratification, but service.

Jesus fends off the first temptation, but the demonic arsenal is hardly exhausted. It is the second attempt we explore this morning. The devil escorts Jesus to some high place and gives him a bird’s eye view of all the kingdoms of the world. “Jesus, all this can be yours – you can be ruler of it all. And even if you aren’t interested in glory, then consider the good you can do with all that power! There is, however, just one small caveat – you will have to shift your allegiance from the one who sent you to the one who tempts you.”

Again, Jesus stands at that fork in the road asking familiar sounding questions. “Why am I here? Will I honor God’s intentions? Or, my own? How will I spend the rest of my life?” On the surface, this temptation actually seems like a pretty good offer. Power, used well, can be a wonderful thing. After all, wasn’t Jesus supposed to be in charge of the world – isn’t that what messiahs do? We read later in Paul’s letter to the Philippians that “one day every knee will bow in and heaven and on earth and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.¹” What could possibly be wrong with cutting to the chase – especially a good chase? Don’t the ends justify the means?

Again, the devil tempts Jesus with something good. Never does temptation come with the small print: “And by the way, this is going to ruin your life,” Or “destroy your marriage,” or “damage people you care about.” No, the temptation is usually to something that, at first, sounds pretty hard to argue with.

But, there are problems inherent in the devil’s offer of power.

A. The Problem of Meaning

The first problem is the matter of meaning. God and the devil understand the purpose of power very differently. We need not look too far to get a sense of the sort of power the devil had in mind. It is the sort that we most associate with the abuses we see in the headlines – in the exploitation of the innocent or needy, in the sacrifice of the weak, the contempt of the poor. The devil’s version of power is wielded in every self-serving decision made in a boardroom or government, in families and churches... it appears in our treatment of the stranger or the checker at Ralph’s. We see the devil’s version of power at play whenever self-interest trumps other-interest. Blogger Edward Kurpis writes: “The best test of a person’s character is how they treat people with less power.”

God understands power very differently. Later on in his ministry Jesus would put it this way – “the one who will be first must be last,” “whoever would be chief among you, let him be your servant.” The prophet Isaiah said that the messiah would come in the form of a “suffering servant.²” God’s plan for Jesus was that his would be the power of forgiveness, the power of service, the power of justice, the power of love. God’s version of power is wielded when governments care about haves and the have-nots, when corporations care about more than the

bottom line – when husbands and wives practice forgiveness – when the CEO and the secretary and the homeless gentleman are seen as people of equal dignity and worth. We see God’s version of power at play whenever servanthood trumps self-interest.

This is where we find Jesus – at the fork in the road there in the wilderness – faced with which version of power he would choose.

B. The Problem of Cost

There was another problem with the devil’s tempting offer... it wouldn’t come cheap. Even if Jesus had said ‘yes’ and put his new-found power to good use, there was still a hefty price tag. The devil said, “all you have to do is worship me” – it will cost you your soul. From the story of Faust to “The Devil and Daniel Webster” even popular culture has warned us against making a pact with the devil. We see that it always seems trivial or unrealistic in the moment, but that the cost is in fact enormous to the pact-maker and, perhaps more tragic, to those around them. The devil’s temptation formula is the same as it was all the way back in the beginning – go ahead, get what you want – do it your way instead of God’s – the problem is, it will always cost a bit of your soul.

V. JESUS’ RESPONSE

Note that temptation comes in the wilderness – a far-away place, a place where no one will see the handshake. There is no spouse to explain anything to, no child to emulate the decision. Surrender comes easiest in isolation. But Jesus is, in a manner of speaking, never fully in isolation – he lived in a God-drenched world; a world in which the presence of his father awaited him in the temple, traveled with him in Scripture and tradition, lived within him in his heart and mind.

As prepared as a person can be for such a moment, Jesus sees through the devil’s offer of power at the expense of his soul – it is simply another proposal to forget who he is meant to be. Countering temptation with Scripture – again he chooses words from Deuteronomy, words he has heard since a child on Joseph’s knee. “It is written,” he says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”³ Jesus can say “no” to the lure of the wrong sort of power because for him, the question of loyalty and allegiance is already settled – he will worship and serve God alone. And, when faced with temptation, Jesus is able to discern and reject the soul-stealing temptation of power because he had studied and internalized Scripture; his second home had been the synagogue; his parents taught him the Torah; he had made a habit of prayer. By the time he came to that fork in the road Jesus was ready with the resources and habits it would take to stand firm.

Tom Long, Professor of Preaching at Candler Theological Seminary tells the story of someone else who found himself at that fork in the road...

“The school where I teach gave an honorary degree last year to a man named Hugh Thompson. On March 16, 1968, Thompson was a young helicopter pilot flying on patrol over the countryside of Vietnam. When he and his crew flew over the village of My Lai (Me Lie), they saw a nightmare taking place below them. United States Army troops in Charlie Company, under the constant pressure of danger and the madness of war, had lost control of their discipline, reason, and humanity, and had begun slaughtering unarmed civilians in the village, most of them women, children, and elderly men. 504 people had already been killed. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining villagers. At great risk to himself, he got out of the helicopter and confronted the officer in charge, William

Calley. He then airlifted the few villagers still alive out of My Lai, and also radioed a report of the scene that resulted in a halt to the action, thus saving thousands of civilian lives.” [*An aside – For the next 25 years Hugh Thompson received death threats, animal carcasses were thrown on his lawn, a congressman called him a traitor.*]

Long continues, “Standing there on the platform at the university commencement, Thompson was given the microphone, and he spoke to the question on everyone’s minds. How could he have found the moral courage and strength to do what he did that day? His answer surprised the audience of graduates – brought them to a thoughtful silence. “I’d like to thank my mother and father for trying to instill in me the difference between right and wrong,” he began. “We were country people. I was born and raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and we had very little. But one thing we did have was the Golden rule. My parents taught me early, ‘Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.’ That’s why I did what I did that day.” He finished with these words to the graduates, “It is hard to put certain things into words. But you are going to have to make many decisions in your life. Please make the right decisions because we’re depending on you. God bless you all.”⁴

Friends, that is why we come here week in and week out. That is why this church is so very important – not only to this generation but to the next. It is here that we learn the difference between right and wrong. It is here that we remember who God intends for us to be. It is here that we learn an alternate version of power, that there is an authority higher than our personal opinion, that nothing is worth our soul. It is here that we gain the resources to resist the temptations that have been stalking humanity for a lifetime.

Even in this week we will find ourselves at that fork in the road – you and I will have decisions to make – matters of character... of integrity... from whether to use a colleague as a stepping stone to power... to whether to practice forgiveness rather than bitterness... to whether to offer kindness, rather than indifference to a stranger... the temptations will be many. The question before us is the same that was before Jesus. Will we take God’s path? Or the road all too often traveled? Please, make the right decisions... because the rest of us really are depending on you.

VII. PRAYER: Lord, help us to see that our lives matter... not only to those we know and love, but also to you and to a world in need of goodness and grace. As did Jesus, may we stand firm in the face of temptation, may we remember who we are meant to be.

AMEN AND AMEN.

¹ Philippians 2:6-11

² Isaiah 53

³ Deuteronomy 6:13

⁴ Thomas G. Long, as quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, February 29, 2004, p. 39.