



“Tough Choices”
Scripture – Luke 4:1-13
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 17, 2013

Here is a quick assignment. Close your eyes and conjure up a wilderness scene. What do you see? Tall dark pines? Craggy, impassable peaks? A thick forest where the only sounds are wolves? What is your vision of a wilderness?

A few years ago, several of us from Westminster traveled to the Holy Land for a spiritual pilgrimage. Our two weeks were spent in worship, lecture and travel. We visited many of the sites associated with Jesus in the gospels – Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, the Mount of Olives.

One afternoon as the bus was taking us from Jericho to Jerusalem, the driver pulled off the highway. We piled out of the coach at a high spot where we could see for miles. This is the wilderness – the desert wilderness. It is not the sandy dunes of the Sahara desert. This geological formation is hills, moguls and cliffs of solid rock.

For several minutes no one uttered a word. All of us were surveying the grassless, treeless, lifeless landscape. As I pondered the desolation of this parched, brown terrain, it struck me as never before, what a life-threatening place the desert is. Water is nearly non-existent. Food, shelter and shade are scarce.

Gazing at this barren landscape, today’s story of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness leapt to mind. It was in this harsh and unforgiving setting between the Dead Sea and Jerusalem that Jesus engaged in spiritual combat with the dark force whose goal was to lure him away from God.

Jesus was about 30 when he was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. The Gospel of Luke informs us that after the baptism, God’s Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and a voice from above said, “You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” But then, God’s Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days of a spiritual boot camp.

God had an unparalleled mission for Jesus, but since God has given freedom to humanity, Jesus had to decide whether he would embrace or reject God’s intent for him. Our passage makes it clear that this was no simple matter. Jesus was tempted to reject the way of God in favor of an easier path. A path that would require less courage and fortitude. A path that would spare him great ridicule and abuse.

Have you ever considered that Jesus, being fully human, could have said “No” to the mission God had in mind for him? He could have said “I’ll follow my own instincts.”

Our passage says that after 40 days in this barren and brutal environment, Jesus was famished. And at this moment when he is running on empty, the prince of darkness appeared with a tempting proposition. The devil bent over and picked up a good-sized rock. He turned it over in his hand. It wasn't clear if he was inspecting it or mulling over an idea. Unexpectedly, he tossed it to Jesus. Jesus caught it. As he did, the tempter said, "Why not turn it into a warm croissant?"

Jesus is famished so a buttery morsel sounds like the perfect ticket. And Jesus would have turned the stone into bread if that were the only issue at hand. But the weeks in the wilderness had honed his insights. He perceived deeper concerns. He replied by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy, words that Moses had spoken to the Hebrew people after they had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."¹

Bread will only meet our physical needs. It cannot satisfy the deeper hungers of our souls. We need not only the food that sustains life, but the food that makes life rich.

Ed White, a friend of mine in Washington, received some bad news in December. After a few medical tests, it was determined that he needed open heart surgery to replace a valve on his aorta. The physician explained that in order to perform the surgery, they would stop his heart. While the heart was not beating, a machine would pump the blood through his body. Then, if the surgery went as planned, they would restart his heart with an electric shock.

The surgery was a success and Ed is on the mend. A couple of weeks ago he fired up his computer and wrote, "Being a prudent fellow, I made my peace with God before the operation not knowing what the outcome would be...The immediate aftermath was difficult. Operations of this magnitude are hard on the body. I had to learn to walk all over again. But the important discovery is that when we come face to face with our mortality, it becomes clear what really matters in life and what doesn't. The trivia that absorb our society stand out in bold relief."

Living as we do, in a culture that pushes fast-food, constant stimulation and instant gratification, these words of Jesus are solid food for people who are starving. While we may be able to keep our stomachs filled, only God can fill our souls. We can produce moments of happiness, but God can deliver lasting joy. We can create a career, but God can give us a purpose. We can find reasons to be optimistic, but God can give us hope.

The first temptation Jesus faced, a temptation each of us faces regularly, was this: Who will you trust to satisfy your needs? Will you buy the tempter's suggestion that you can fulfill your own needs or will you look to God?

After Jesus deflected the first temptation, the devil whisked him to a spot where he could show Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He said, "I'll give you glory, Jesus, and authority! Think of all the good you could do! And the price? A pittance. Simply worship me."

The devil took Lance Armstrong to the top of the highest mountain on the Tour de France and spread out the world of sports before him. The devil said, "You can be the king of the cycling world and build a multi-million dollar empire. Your name will become synonymous with beating the odds and winning. Everyone will want to know you, to touch you, to cheer for you. All you have to do is use some performance-enhancing drugs. Who would not want to enhance his performance?"

Armstrong took the bait and lived his dream for more than 10 years. He even convinced himself that it was the right thing to do, using the same justification that has coaxed so many others into wrongdoing: Everybody else is doing it.

The celebrity culture is a disturbing development of the 21st century. An increasing number of people of all ages strive for notoriety simply for the sake of recognition. Rather than aspiring to make a positive contribution to the world, more and more people aspire to simply be well-known. If it takes outrageous and destructive behavior in order to stand in the limelight, so be it.

Jesus rejected the devil's temptation to strive for glory and influence by refusing to chase after lesser gods. He said, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Never one to give up, the tempter tried a different approach. Taking Jesus to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, the devil said, "Jump. Trust me, you'll be fine. But don't just take my word for it, the 91st Psalm says "God will command his angels to protect you so that you will not so much as dash your foot against a stone."

When you feel the pressure of being tested, do not try to get out from under it by sitting passively and calling on God to clean up your mess. When you have attacked another and prompted a conflict, don't whistle for God to step in and settle the dispute. When you have become addicted to practices that destroy the environment, don't expect God to heal the earth. When a relationship becomes poisoned, don't imagine that it is God's job to fix it.

Jesus thwarts the attempts of the devil by declaring "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Our passage concludes, not by saying, "The devil knew he had been defeated and surrendered," but rather, "(Satan) departed from him until a more opportune time." He would definitely show up again.

Whether you think of the devil as a literal figure or a dark force that runs counter to God, there is something that tempts us to do things we ought not do, and tempts us to put aside the things we ought to do.

The tempter whispers, "Just do what will make you feel good." But then a man's marriage vows begin to unravel when he meets an attractive young co-worker for a drink. A hedge fund manager goes to jail because he gives in to his craving for more and begins to embezzle.

Living in a culture that promotes ease and comfort, and encourages us to do what feels good, a spiritual struggle sounds like something to avoid at all costs. But is it?

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

Are you up to a match with the tempter during these weeks of Lent? Where is your weak spot he'll try to undermine? The way you handle your wealth? The way you treat your neighbor? How quick you are to forgive? What about your priorities?

God wants to know what YOU are made of. Are you up for the test?

NOTES

1. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus quotes this verse from Deuteronomy in its entirety. While Luke does not include the words, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," it seems apparent that this is what Luke infers.

Prayers of the People
By the Reverend Dr. Anne R. Ledbetter

Holy, invisible Lord, in rain and snow, in sunshine and cloudy weather, in times of ease and moments of distress – you are God, the One who rules our lives and world in sovereign Love. We are so grateful for this time and place of worship – where we may gather with other followers of the Way, unburden our souls in prayer and silence, open our hearts to comfort, healing, and inspiration, and simply soak up the smiles, greetings, and encouragement of others.

O God, we admit the constant ways we feel lured away from you and your will for us – our pursuit of personal wealth and the power, comfort and prestige we believe it will bring, our tendency to draw a small circle around ourselves – seeking what will simply work best for us and those closest to us, our inclination to cut corners or take the easy way – however questionable. You know the temptations which daily threaten to undo us. Deliver us from their power, keep us strong in faith, obedient in love.

Gracious God, throughout all ages you have rescued and restored your people; we come to you for refreshment and renewal. Lord, protect us from the terrors of the night and the dangers of the day. We pray for all who are seeking to know their vocation, and all who are trying to sort out their priorities.

We pray for all in positions of authority, that they do not misuse their powers; for leaders of nations and for all whose decisions affect the lives of many. We remember all who are suffering from hunger or poverty or homelessness. We pray for our women and men in uniform serving overseas, not least those serving at this time in difficult and dangerous desert places, and for their families and friends watching and waiting and worrying at home, and for those who minister to them as chaplains. We lift up all those victimized by war, and pray for people committed to peacemaking the world over.

We give thanks for those who have provided for us and watched over us through the years, and for those who have ministered to us and inspired or encouraged us. Make us sensitive to your call and ready to do your will, and bless and protect all those whom we hold dear.

God of our lives, as we begin our Lenten journey remind us that we are not alone. We travel with sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents, friends and family, all of us saints and sinners of the faith. Moreover, we journey with you as our refuge and strength – our ever-present help in times of trial and trouble, glory and gladness. Help us remember each day that Christ is not only our guide, but our fellow companion, and give us eyes to discern his presence among us.

Prepare our hearts

to seek you and embrace you,
to hear you and follow you,
to love you and to serve you.

We pray in the name of Jesus who taught his followers to pray saying:

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.