

“Tempting Story Lines”

March 10, 2019

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Luke 4:1-13

Every year, the first Sunday of Lent is Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, but I have to admit that the passage struck me different this year. Normally we look to Jesus and try to learn how He resisted temptation. We notice how He knew His Bible and was able to quote Scripture back at the devil to justify and fortify His resistance. The lesson we hear is about knowing our Bible, and knowing it well enough to use it to resist the temptations in our lives. Don't get me wrong, that is good stuff; but this week I have really been digging into the temptations themselves. I googled “temptations” and this is what I found. Matt, press the play button. <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=youtube%2c+temptations%2c+%22my+girl%22&qpvt=youtube%2c+temptations%2c+%22my+girl%22&view=detail&mid=5F9E6CEA57140A680C645F9E6CEA57140A680C64&&FORM=VRDGAR> The sweet sounds of Motown, but those are not the Temptations Luke is writing about in chapter 4.

Which is exactly what I learned – the thing that looks like the temptation is not really what Luke is talking about. When we think of temptations, we think of chocolate cake when we are on a diet, or playing solitaire on the computer at work, or sleeping in, or skipping the grand-nephew's track meet because it is cold outside; but once again, that is not what Jesus is dealing with here. Those are not the temptations. In the first temptation that Luke tells us about, Jesus has been fasting for 40 days with nothing to eat and He is hungry. He is not “how long until lunch hungry”, but truly famished. That is when the devil simply reminds Him, You are the Son of God, it is okay, turn a stone into a loaf of bread and get yourself something to eat. My question is, “why not?” Nobody is hurt. There is not victim. There is no downside. He is not taking food out of someone else's mouth. He is not breaking any laws or infringing on anybody else's rights. It will heal His hunger and make Him happy while hurting nobody else. What is wrong with that? Why is that a temptation as opposed to a simple knee jerk reaction? Eating, no longer hungry, no victim, no brainer! Well, I don't think the temptation has anything to do with stones and bread. The temptation is to buy into the narrative, into the rationalization, the logic. The narrative that says the goal in life is to be happy, and you are invited to do whatever you want that makes you happy as long as you don't hurt someone else or infringe on their rights. After all, we are two consenting adults. There is no victim. Therefore, there is no problem. That way of thinking is the temptation, not turning stone to bread. Jesus responds to that narrative by saying, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” The whole verse from Deuteronomy says “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus is telling us that responding to your physical desires as the road to happiness isn't real – it is a temptation. Happiness is a by-product of faithfulness. Let me say that again, happiness is a by-product of faithfulness. Having all your needs and desires filled does not lead to happiness. That narrative is the temptation, and that temptation is multiplied by the rationalization that says any behavior that does not harm someone else is okay. Obedience to God makes things okay. Living in

faithfulness to every word that comes from God is the logic – the narrative – that leads to happiness.

In the second temptation the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and says they will all be yours if you just worship me. Now, nobody has ever offered me to rule all the kingdoms of the world, but the offer is not the temptation. The narrative or the logic is the temptation. We hear it all the time. “Just have your son follow my step by step video and he will have the skills of a major league baseball player. Your child will thank you.” “Just buy this exercise machine and use it for 12 minutes, 3 times a week and you will look like this.” “Just work a little harder, a little more effort and few more hours and you will advance up the ranks.” It has been a number of years ago now, but I was talking with a woman about a recall on a diet pill because the pill did so much damage to the user’s vital organs that it shortened their lifespan by 5 years. This intelligent, married, attractive mom said she would gladly give up 5 years of her life in order to be thin – really?!? The temptation is to buy into the narrative that being thin, getting the promotion, giving your child what they need to stay a step ahead of everyone else, fame, fortune, power – that these things are worth your life and soul. The temptation is not ruling all the kingdoms of the world. The temptation is putting the things of this temporary world ahead of your eternal relationship with God. Are you worshipping God or are you worshipping the things this world values? Look at your church attendance, your devotional life and prayer time, your finances and how you spent your time. Have you bought into the narrative? Did you drink the Kool-Aid? What are you worshipping, serving, investing in this world compared to the next? Putting the things we can see before the One we cannot – that is the temptation.

The last narrative is the most ridiculous but also the hardest to resist. The devil says “Jump Jesus. Jump and God will catch you. If God really loves You, He will catch You.” It is ridiculous because we all know it is our job is to serve God, not God’s job to serve us and be at our beck and call to do whatever we want when we want it. We know the order of creation is us under God, but we still ask, “Why did she get cancer? She was one of the good people.” “Why did my son have to die when there are so many worse sinners than him?” “God, if you love me, then why did you let this happen to me?” The narrative is hard to resist but God never promised a life of perfect pleasure and ease here. It sure didn’t work out that way for Jesus. This is not God’s kingdom – not yet. Pretending it is or even thinking it should be is the temptation. We fall for this line whenever we try to define how God should act and what God should do – applying our logic to God. It is tempting, but not helpful.

This world is filled with all kinds of stories, narratives that try to define who you should be, what you should value, and what your life should be about. For me, it all comes down to who you trust. Who do you trust to help define who you are and what you are supposed to be and do? Television? Talk radio? Hollywood? Too many times it is true. Do you trust parents? Teachers? Culture? Advertisers? Bosses? Co-workers? Do you trust professional athletes? The ultra-rich? Artificial intelligence? Or do you trust the One who created you, created this world for you, and even died for you? Who do you trust? Whose narrative do you trust? Whose logic or formula do you trust?

Jesus' temptation and ours is to listen to a narrative that sounds good, but leads to death as opposed to one that sounds hard, foreign, strange; but leads to life.

Appendix (shared just before the benediction)

In this morning's Scripture, the devil came and tempted Jesus with bread not when He was full, but when He was really, really hungry. The devil has always been an opportunist, who attacks when we are the most vulnerable. Which begs the question, "What are the vulnerable places which the devil attacks today? What are the places where our identity has been shaken or is being formed? Where are the places where we are looking for a new narrative for our lives? Can we the Church, you the church be there in those vulnerable places to give the devil some competition?"

I read a book this week that shared two statistics. The first one I already knew and most of you know. Most people come to church because a friend or family member invites them. The book put that number at 86%, but it also asked what brings people to seek out a church family, to visit on their own. 50% of those people just moved. 10% either just got or were looking to get married. The remaining 40% sought out a church family because they experienced some sort of crisis or transition in their life. In other words, their earthly narrative failed them. Whether it was the loss of parent, gaining of baby, illness, or financial changes; something made them realize the story they were centering their life around was failing them and they were all alone.

What does it mean when we put those 2 stats together? It means people in vulnerable places really need a friend or family member to invite them to Jesus and church. It means we need to meet the devil on his turf of vulnerability and bring them to Jesus. Not in a preachy way, but more like "I am not going to pretend to know how you feel, but when I was in a similar place my church family helped get me through. Not only did they let me know I was not alone, but church is a place God can touch you and help you get through it." This week, and in the weeks that follow, be aware of those around you whose world is falling apart because they have been following this world's line of reasoning over God's wisdom. Be aware, and invite them home to Jesus through this church.

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