

Date: Sunday February 21, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Title: “Temptation”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus overcomes the temptations while in the wilderness.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Using Jesus example two thousand years later and by turning to God, we can resist troubling temptations that come our way.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Remember last week, we talked about a dog that could not swim? This week we start with a dog that has died. The dog’s owner calls a UCC pastor and asked him if he would perform a funeral in the sanctuary of the church for the beloved dog. “I can’t do that,” said the minister, politely. “A funeral for a pet in church would be questioned.” The owner persisted but the minister insisted, “Sorry, I cannot help you. Tell you what though; call the Lutheran minister down the street.” “Okay,” said the owner. “But at least give me some advice. Should I offer the Lutheran pastor \$400 or \$500 for this funeral service?” “Wait a second,” said the minister, quickly, “You never said your dog was UCC (Gondola)!” I would be tempted to bury that dog as well.

Like the minister in the story, and like me, everyone faces temptation. Golf star Tiger Woods talked about his troubles stemming from “temptation,” his word, this past Friday. Temptation affects us all. This difference being what tempts us. I don’t know what tempts you. But I know *you* know. It could be something as simple as chocolate – huh, wonder how that got in there, or any favorite food,

potato chips, calling out seductively when we are trying to refrain. It could be making creative changes on income tax returns. Temptation could come in the form of alcohol or drugs, or a relationship outside of marriage. It can be gambling. For a student, temptation can be procrastination: why not watch TV tonight and study tomorrow? For a teacher, it can be procrastination. For a minister, it can be procrastination. Some might be tempted to gossip and spread a juicy story. It can be saying something derogatory about someone in the hopes of being funny or looking important. It could be getting revenge on someone we think has done something wrong to us. We all face temptations. Some are innocent, some are life altering. Like the minister in the story I shared, we can be quick to cave in. As the Irish wit, Oscar Wilde put it, “I can resist anything, except temptation.”

This morning we have read and heard a story from Luke about Jesus being tempted by the devil. Edwin Bowen writes that a lot of people mistakenly assume that the outcome of this story was a foregone conclusion. People mistakenly assume that since Jesus was the Son of God, he was incapable of sinning or ever doing anything wrong. It’s like the Christmas carol, “Away in a Manger,” where we sing in the second verse, “The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” No crying he makes? Babies cry! But this is what people assume when it comes to Jesus. Some have the tendency to think that since Jesus was the Son of God, it was impossible for him to ever sin or to do anything wrong.

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that Jesus sinned. But I am

saying that the reason Jesus never sinned was not because he wasn't able to sin; not because he was programmed like a robot in such a way that sinning wasn't an option for him. No, we need to remember that Jesus was divine, as we talked about last week, but Jesus was also human. And that's a good thing. Being human means that if Jesus had wanted to sin against God, he could have. He chose not to. When we encounter this story in Luke about Jesus being tempted by the devil, we find Jesus facing the very same kind of struggles that we have to deal with in our lives. By seeing how Jesus stood up to his temptations and how he resisted the temptations, we find ourselves being invited to follow Jesus' example and to stand up and resist the temptations that arise in our lives.

So let's take a look at this story and consider what kind of temptations Jesus had to face. First off, since Jesus had been fasting for 40 days, since Jesus had gone more than a month without eating, the devil decided to hit hard at the heart of need and so the hunger that Jesus felt is addressed. The devil came up to him and said, "Jesus, I can tell that you're starving. I can tell that you want something to eat. Why don't you just use those special powers that God has given you and get what you want and turn this stone into a piece of bread?" The devil was trying to get Jesus to change his focus from God to bread and to the possessions that Jesus could have for himself; possessions that could be his for the taking. But Jesus refused, quoting from Deuteronomy where it says, "You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (8:3). Jesus resisted the first temptation and in doing so, he resisted the temptation possessions can have on us.

For a second temptation, the devil lifted Jesus up in the air and showed him all the countries of the world, and said that Jesus could rule over all those lands if only Jesus would bow down and worship him. What an offer. But again Jesus resisted and refused to give in to that temptation, reciting from Deuteronomy where it says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (6:13). Thus, as a result, Jesus held out against the temptation that power can have over us.

Finally, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, and the Bible says that he took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. It’s not 100% clear what the “pinnacle of the temple” was. But we do know that the temple in Jerusalem was built on top of a high hill. Around the temple were massive walls. Possibly what is meant here is that the devil took Jesus up on top of one of those magnificent walls, where there was a huge, steep drop-off. I imagine it is a point like that where the devil said to Jesus, “Jump! Go ahead and jump. Then using scripture the crafty devil quotes from Psalms, “God will send his angels concerning you . . .” (91:11-12). And the devil continues persuading Jesus by telling him that when everyone in Jerusalem sees Jesus has been saved, he’ll be famous. He’ll be the talk of the town. The devil makes the point that Jesus will have more attention than he’ll know what to do with and everyone will want to be his friend. But one more time Jesus resisted and refused to give in to the temptation as he quoted from Deuteronomy a third time and said, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”(6:16). In doing that, Jesus conquered the temptation that popularity can have on us.

Jesus came face to face with three temptations: the temptation of possessions,

the temptation of power, and the temptation of popularity. And in each case, instead of giving in to those temptations, Jesus kept himself focused on God, and on the kind of life that God wanted him to live. Interestingly, in a chilling statement, today's passage makes it clear that the evils of temptation will be faced again, at an "opportune" time (4:13). So the question becomes, what about us? When it comes to the temptations of possessions, power, and popularity or any others are we prepared to stand up and resist those temptations, or will we give in?

Let's look at the three temptations I have raised from Luke and ask ourselves, in what ways do possessions tempt us? In what ways do we find ourselves tempted to focus more and more on money, to focus more and more on the things that money can buy? Jesus said: "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also" (Matthew 6:21). Where are our hearts? Are we able to tell the difference between what we want and what we need? When it comes to the temptation of possessions, how are we doing?

Or in what ways does power tempt us? Now our goal might not be to become the king or queen over all the earth. But in what ways are we tempted at times to mistreat those around us? I don't know about you, but I've heard about, read about, and been to restaurants with people who have treated the waiters and waitresses with disrespect, ignoring them, barking out orders, complaining about this, complaining about that – not giving even the least little bit of consideration to the fact that that waiter or waitress is a person and deserves respect. When it comes to the temptation of power, how are we doing?

In what ways does popularity tempt us? In what ways are we tempted at times to go along with the crowd, even when we know that that's not the right thing to be doing? In what ways do we at times so want to be liked, to be approved of, that we're tempted to turn our back on what God wants us to be doing so that we can be accepted and cheered on by those around us? When it comes to the temptation of popularity, how are we doing (Bowen)?

Possessions, power, and popularity were three temptations that Jesus faced. Jesus shows us, in word and deed, that when we are tempted by possessions, power, and popularity, we can resist. That's good news. Now those are not the only temptations we face in life. But if we can learn to deal with those three, chances are we'll be in a pretty good position to deal with any other kinds of temptations that come our way. So during this season of Lent, when we find ourselves being tempted, let us follow Jesus' guidance, look to God, and trust God to give us all we need to resist and prevail. Let us pray.

Lord,

We need to turn to you and focus on you. Thank you for being available to us and making it possible to rely on you. Be patient with us when we don't. We are grateful for your graciousness when we do. In all things, we hope for Christ as our guide. This we pray. Amen.

Offering – This can be a moment of temptation. Let us overcome it and give generously for the ministries of this church. The ushers will please come forward.

Dedication – Lord, we ask that you accept and bless this offering. Guide us as your church to use these gifts for you and further your service in the world. Amen

Benediction – We go forth on our Lenten journey this day, aware of some barriers and temptations we may face along the way, but blessed by the One that guides us for good of all.

Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Gondola, Alex & C. Edward Bowen; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.