

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, February 14, 2016
Text: Deuteronomy 26:5-11; Luke 4:1-13

The Right Things for the Wrong Reasons



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703
608-256-9061 | www.fumc.org

The Lenten season always begins in the same place – the wilderness. We in Wisconsin might think of “the wilderness” as “up north,” maybe the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, or even up all the way to the boundary waters, a wilderness of dense forest, brambles, wild animals, and rushing streams. But, that is not “the wilderness” of the Bible. In that region it is a barren, parched, desolate place . . . nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to provide shade during the day, nothing to give warmth at night. Nothing.

And there is Jesus, in the wilderness, for forty days. This is not punishment but preparation. He has been led there by the Holy Spirit, Luke writes, in order to contemplate his public ministry as God’s Chosen One. And in the midst of this nothingness, with no distractions to divert his attention from the tasks ahead, he thinks. We do not know what he thinks, but the temptations Luke senses that Jesus faces certainly point toward the tests he will encounter once he returns to civilization.

After forty days Jesus is starving, and the voice of the devil says, “Go ahead, Jesus. You are the Son of God. You can turn those stones into bread and feed your own needs. Use your strength to serve yourself,” and Jesus responds, “No,” and he quotes his scripture like the good rabbi he is, “One does not live by bread alone.”

The devilish voice then says, “Look, if you are going to accomplish all that you sense is being expected of you, then you will need all of the power and authority you can muster. Look at all of the kingdoms of the world. I can give you dominion over them. All you have to do is worship me, and all will be yours.” And again, Jesus turns to his text, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Third, the devil’s challenge goes to the very identity of Jesus. “If you really are the Son of God, as you claim, then prove it to the world by doing something miraculous. Go to the top of the temple and jump; surely, if you are the Son of God, angels will swoop in and catch you before you hit the ground.” Use your chosenness by God to solidify your identity as a sacred presence in the world. Jesus quotes his scripture again, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In every one of the three cases, the temptation put to Jesus by the demonic one is not unreasonable. “After all, who would find fault with you, Jesus, if you had not eaten for weeks, and you had the power to turn stones into bread? Go ahead and use it to serve your own needs. Restore your physical power.”

“And if you, Jesus, feel the call to rule in the world amidst the powers and principalities that already exist, then you will have to make some compromises and do some dealing. Be realistic. Enter into a pact with the devil and you might be able to do even more good than if you stay aloof. It is okay if you compromise your values to produce an even greater good. Political power is all about making the right deal.”

“And if you sense that your authority rests on being accepted as the Son of God, if that is who indeed you are, then flaunt it. Do something miraculous, then all of us will believe in you. Jump off the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels catch you. What a great circus act! Just know that spectacle quickly becomes commonplace, so you will have to do something even more spectacular tomorrow.”

We must assume that Jesus could have met any one of the three challenges the devil places before him. That would have played to his unique strength. One would have fortified his body, another solidified his public authority, and another established him as a living religious presence. These may have been the right things to do, but he would have been doing them for the wrong reason. He would have done it to promote himself rather than to honor God. The devil was playing to his selfishness, his self-promotion, but Jesus already was exerting the discipline of emptying himself, of being selfless in order to be faithful to God.

Lent is the season in which we face our greatest temptations, including the temptation to use our strengths to get our way. Instead, we are called to turn away from ourselves and toward God. That is the simple meaning of “repent.” I have been reading Jim Wallis’ book, America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America, for our Wednesday evening Lenten discussion of race in Madison, which starts this Wednesday at 7 p.m. in Fellowship Hall. He puts it simply: “Repentance is more than just saying you’re sorry, or even just feeling guilty . . . it is about turning completely around and going in a whole new direction.” (p.57, 58) And then, he quotes N.T. Wright, a well-regarded traditional biblical scholar, who defines “repentance” as “a serious turning away from patterns of life that deface and distort our genuine humanness.” (p.61) Further from N.T. Wright, “The technical term for (failing to reflect God’s image in the world) is ‘sin,’ whose primary meaning is not ‘breaking the rules’ but ‘missing the mark.’” (p.62) When we have a Prayer of Confession in our liturgy, as we do today, it is to give us words with which we can turn back toward God. We are to be like the prodigal child, the good Jewish son who is slopping pigs in a foreign land when he “comes to himself,” realizes that he has missed the mark, and turns back home to his loving parent.

Now, it may be the case, if we are honest with ourselves, that we preview the words of the Prayer of Confession before we pray it and do some editing. “I didn’t do that this week, I can’t image doing that, and I am not even sure what that means. No, this does not represent me before God.”

There are a couple of assumptions at work behind a communal prayer of confession. First, the general truth is that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Most simply, none of us is perfect, even if in Wesleyan terms we are “going on to perfection.” He never meant that we would get everything right but that each day as a Christian we

should be developing toward a more mature and complete faith. No, we all have something to “own up to.” We all can mumble, along with the apostle Paul, that the good we want to do we do not do, and the evil we try to avoid we end up doing.

And second, our Prayer of Confession is plural, not singular. This is the confession of the Church, of all of us together. And if each of us is reluctant to own a sin, “missing the mark” personally, then all of us can see still clearly where we together as the Church, the followers of Jesus Christ, have fallen short of the glory of God. We do not have to be sitting in the middle of the nothingness of the desert to get in touch with ourselves; we can do it together in the quietness of this place.

T.S. Eliot wrote a poetic drama which parallels our biblical story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, “Murder in the Cathedral.” Eliot was born in St. Louis; that is surprising since most of us imagine that he came from Oxford, where he ended up. But go to the walk of fame along Delmar Avenue and there is Eliot’s star right in there with Chuck Berry and Red Schoendienst. The play is about Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, who is murdered by the knights representing King Henry II on December 29, 1170, while he is worshiping in the evening vesper service. His sin, in the eyes of the king? Being too religious and not political enough. Listen to Eliot’s plot and see how it is a 20th Century parable of the biblical story.

Thomas starts out as one of the king’s inner circle of friends and confidants, soon becoming the Chancellor of the kingdom at the king’s will, using the king’s legal authority to tax the barons and keep the Established Church subservient to the throne. As an act to consolidate even more power, the king appoints Thomas as Archbishop of Canterbury, putting him in authority over the Church and, thereby, subsuming the Church under the power of the throne.

Now Thomas is both Chancellor and Archbishop. The only thing King Henry II does not consider is that Thomas, now fully immersed in the life of the Church, becomes religious. He begins to believe what he preaches and what he sees in his clergy colleagues and the faithfulness of the peasants of the realm. He resigns his role as Chancellor and begins to exert the power of the Church in opposition to the throne. The king becomes furious, and Thomas flees to France in order to save his life.

Eliot’s play begins when Thomas returns to Canterbury under a precarious truce with Henry II. The residents are thrilled, his fellow priests are encouraged, but immediately Thomas is set upon by temptation in the persona of four tempters. We begin to hear the echo of our gospel reading for this First Sunday of Lent.

The first tempter: “Thomas, welcome back. The king and all of your friends from the old days are looking forward to seeing you again. But can you get off of this religious kick and go back to the way things were, you know, like that night along the river with Hank and the guys, the music, the feasts, the wit and wine and wisdom? You were not used to be so hard upon sinners when they were your friends. Be easy, man! The easy man lives to eat the best dinners.” And Thomas simply replies, “You come twenty years too late.” He will not give in to his own safety and pleasure.

The second tempter: “You made a mistake, Thomas, by resigning as the Chancellor, but the king will give it back to you. Imagine all of the power that the king and you could exert together. Think, my Lord, power obtained grows to glory, life lasting, a permanent possession.” But Thomas resists making a pact with the devil to regain political power. “When I have the power to bind and loose in the name of God, why would I descend to desire a punier power?”

The third tempter comes forward with just the opposite lure of power. Instead of siding with the king, take up arms with the barons and fight the king for freedom from the oppression coming from the throne. The strength of the Church added to the will of the people would be unstoppable. But Thomas scoffs, “I ruled once as Chancellor, and men like you were glad to wait at my door. . . Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves now take the shape of a wolf among wolves? No, pursue your treacheries on your own; I will not betray the king.”

Three tempters and three temptations that mirror the temptations of Jesus: the first, a temptation to put oneself first; the second, to compromise with evil to exert political power; the third, to use religious authority to get what you desire. And then, there is a fourth tempter in Eliot’s play, one that hits at the center of the human heart. What are our motives behind what we do, even what we do that is good?

The tempter comes to tell Thomas what Thomas already knows in his heart – that he would like to be honored in history, to be remembered for doing something noble, to be a saint. “Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest on earth, to be high in heaven. And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed, your persecutors, in timeless torment, parched passion, beyond expiation.” Martyrdom as a way to get even, to show for all time who is the winner. Thomas replies with a newfound insight, “The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

The knights confront Thomas with the king’s demands; Thomas remains faithful to his role as Archbishop. His only desire now is to do God’s bidding; all else takes care of itself. He will not use his position to save himself, to rule over others, to revolt against the throne, or to seek his own glory. Now it is time for vespers.

The priests try to lock the knights out of the cathedral, and Thomas shouts, “Unbar the doors! I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress. . . . The Church shall be open, even to our

enemies. Open the door!” The knights rush in and slay Thomas, justifying it as suicide of a sort; after all, they say, it is what he really wanted.

Being faithful can be dangerous. Devotion to God’s call is not a way to protect ourselves against hardship, it is not a way to exert political power, it is not a way to claim spiritual superiority over others, it is not a way to become a saint. This is true for the Church as well as for the individual Christian. We heard it on Ash Wednesday. “Do not give to the poor in order to impress others. Do not pray in public to demonstrate one’s sanctity. Do not fast and keep the disciplines of the faith as a means of winning admiration.” Keep the faith, but beware of doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Amen.