

Provisions for the Journey: Word

First Sunday of Lent

February 17, 2013

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Texts: Deuteronomy 26.1-11;
Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16;
Romans 10.8b-13;
Luke 4.1-13

I know there are some of you who love the desert wilderness. I suspect I would come to love it too if I spent more time there. But when I visited the southwest for the first time and I saw the vast empty, dry land, I felt a new appreciation for the biblical image of the desert as a place where people feel cut off from God. It has become a metaphor for many of us to describe periods of our life when we feel utterly alone in the world. Sometimes we are driven into the wilderness by circumstance: a lost job or an unexpected death or a sudden betrayal. Sometimes it just seems to come from nowhere. You can't quite place when that aching loneliness began and you can't point to some situation as the trigger. You just feel that your faith is stretched so thin you wonder if it's even there anymore. For the most part the desert wilderness is a place we seek to avoid.

According to Luke this morning, the wilderness is a place Jesus went at the beginning of his ministry intentionally. Coming out of his baptism, full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led into the wilderness where he spent 40 days faced with temptation. I want to spend a brief moment looking with you at the first time we hear about temptation in Genesis 3. I encourage you to go back to that story this week and see whether this reading of that story resonates with you. The story of Jesus' temptation mirrors the story of that first temptation so I think it's helpful to be clear about the territory he is entering.

For many, many years people have looked at that story of how sin entered the world in Genesis 3 and claim that pride or disobedience is at the root of sin and that it all begins with the act of eating the forbidden fruit. But to

truly understand the anatomy of temptation we have to move further back in the story than that to the very first question the serpent poses: “Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?¹” With this seemingly innocent question of clarification, the deceiver plants a thought into her mind that maybe she doesn’t know this God the way she thought she did. And as the comments and questions go on between them she is led to doubt whether God might be holding something back – something wonderful, something powerful, something they need that God has not provided: “God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God- knowing good and evil.²” Perhaps God cannot be counted on and if God will not provide then we have to fend for ourselves. What started as perfect union between God and creation crumbles into alienation: they feel alienated from their own bodies, they feel shame in their nakedness, they hide from God, they blame each other.

Jesus goes into the desert to confront these questions. Is he alone in the world? Can God be trusted to give him all the provision that he needs for the journey he is about to embark upon? Facing this temptation gave him clarity. No, he is not alone. God is always and at every moment as close to him as his breath. With this truth he begins his ministry.

In Lent, we are invited to follow Jesus into the desert to face ourselves before God and to ask what shape temptation takes in our life. For a lot of years I was vehemently opposed to the practice of giving things up for Lent. What are we trying to accomplish by giving up chocolate, for instance? I wondered if all the effort at self-denial and sacrifice was really, even if on an unconscious level, about trying to make ourselves somehow worthy of the salvation God offers. Jesus doesn’t go into the desert to make himself worthy of his ministry or to prove his worth. He goes there to make himself ready for it. There is a big difference between those two things.

Then I ran across an article by Barbara Brown Taylor some years ago that put this conversation about how to observe Lent into some new

¹ Genesis 3.1, NRSV.

² Genesis 3.5, NRSV.

perspective for me. It was an article called "Settling for Less." She wrote:

"It is necessary, to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I am convinced that 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves."³

That's another way to read the temptation story: all the subtle ways that the deceiver was tempting Jesus to take matters into his own hands instead of looking to God for his provision.

What kept him clear in the desert was his reliance on God's Word. I suppose you could begin with the obvious - that he knew the scriptures to begin with. He clearly spent his life listening, learning, and immersing himself in the Word of God. He was quoting for the Torah (from the book of Deuteronomy) at every turn. But it isn't quite as simple as memorizing scripture as valuable as that practice may be. There was a point when the devil was quoting scripture right back at him. You have probably seen in your lifetime as I have seen in mine how people who know the words of scripture can twist those words until they bear little resemblance to the God these words are meant to show us.

Karl Barth was a 20th century theologian who lived in Germany during the rise of Hitler. He quite concerned about the way he saw people twisting God's Word. He began to speak in terms of the three fold form of God's Word. He saw them as concentric circles. In the center was the Word - the Word who was with God in the beginning, the Word who was God, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. The only way we have access to that self-revealed Word of God is through the written witness of the prophets and the apostles....the written scriptures. These written

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Settling for Less", *Christian Century*, February 18, 1998.

words are not in and of themselves the Word. They are a witness to the Word. And those who wrote those scriptures continued to be fully human with all the limitations that come with that humanity. And so we must always listen closely for the Word of God to be revealed to us as the written scriptures are read. We are to listen for those underlying themes and movements of God's Word in both the Old and New Testaments. The outer circle is what Barth called the Word of God proclaimed. It is the way that God's people give witness through their proclamation and life to the Word of God as it is revealed to us through the witness of the prophets and apostles.

I appreciate the complexity of seeing the Word of God in this way. It explains how the Word of God can be so dynamic and enduring. It explains why the Word can be a lifeline for God's people through the ages and why, as Gordon shared with us last week, we so regularly need to step back from what we assume God's Word means to listen again with fresh ears to what God is speaking to us today.

This is what the season of Lent is designed to do for us: to help us become attuned to God's Word and aware of God's presence and faithfulness in our lives. Give something up. Don't give something up. Just focus your attention on the grace of God and become aware of the places you are tempted to turn to your own devices. If we are to do anything during Lent then let it be a discipline that makes us more aware that everything we need has already been given to us.

So let us begin this season of Lent with hearts wide open to receive the Word of God, to be fed at Christ's table, and to learn as Jesus learned in the desert that God is as close to us as our very breath.

Thanks be to God!

Luke 4.1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

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, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

This is the gospel of the Lord,
Praise to you, O Christ.