

Untitled Lent 1 sermon based on Luke 4:1-13, David Jahnke, 2/21/10

The 40 days of Lent have roots in Jesus' 40 days in the desert. Lent is a season of wrestling with powers which reject the kingdom of God. I am going to characterize and name these powers as scripture does-- by referring to them as the devil.

Jesus was hungry after 40 days of fasting. An important question is whether we have spent enough time set apart from the world to recognize our hunger. If we are not hungry for righteousness, we are probably filling ourselves with idols that keep us from truly attending to our hungry spirits.

The alcoholic who is in denial is the obvious example. Denying a problem means the false nourishment of alcohol can continually widen the empty places, rather than fill them. Believing we have no spiritual hunger means that idols can continue to broaden our emptiness.

When we are conscious of our hunger, the devil moves to more sophisticated tactics. He acknowledges the truth and then twists it. He tries to heighten our emptiness and boredom, and suggests that stones might become bread, as he did to Jesus. "There is no real bread around. So take this stone and turn it into bread." To the recovering addict, the devil says, "There is no one to turn to. Just have one drink or a toke and you will feel better." To a shopper whose debt is already extensive, "Just buy it and you will feel happy." To the frustrated parent, "Just let all that anger out with a shout. That will bring peace to your home." To the young husband struggling with pornography, "Just take a peek at the website. Then you will feel relief..."

And while these may be somewhat extreme examples, there are more subtle and less severe ones which tempt us every day. And stones can never become bread.

Notice how the devil reminds Jesus that Jesus is someone special. He says, “As the Son of God you can surely turn these stones into bread; the laws of nature do not apply to you; you see there is no bread but you deserve to eat something after all you have been through.

Tiger Woods spoke on Friday about how he knew that what he was doing was wrong. But that he had convinced himself that he was somehow special. That the rules of morality did not apply to him; that he deserved whatever pleasures were available to him.

We all are really special; no less special than Tiger Woods. But the twisting of our blessedness into pride is another devilish tactic. And the idea that we are deserving is rampant in our self-centered consumer culture today. Because it is much easier to sell something to someone who believes they deserve it. It’s much easier to indulge something which may not be good for us or which we do not need if we have been convinced that we deserve a little “freedom” from what is good or right.

We are special because of God’s love. And because of the gifts of God. And these gifts are to be used always in a framework of love and to the glory of the Giver rather than as we wish.

Jesus’ first response to the devil tells us how to resist temptation. “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Karl Barth wrote of the 3 forms of the Word of God: 1. Christ Jesus, the incarnate word, 2. scripture, the written word and 3. the church--the Word proclaimed by the body of Christ. It is the 1. Spirit of Christ, 2. holy scripture and 3. loving fellowship which bring life and fulfillment. And in order to gradually progress from knowing what is right to consistently doing it depends on letting the Word of God come to life in our conscience. We do this through time with God in the wilderness—through making sacred space and time for prayer, study and fellowship.

The devil does not give up easily. He will try to distort sacred space as well. As Jesus looked out upon God's beautiful world from a high mountain, the devil claimed all the kingdoms were his. And that they could all belong to Jesus. Wealth, power, and pleasure were at his fingertips...if he would turn from God and make the world his own; if he would make a demonic idol out of the things of the world.

When we start to see the beauty of this world, the devil will tell us that things can be ours. If it's power we are after, we can find people to have power over. If it's money we are after, the devil will provide (especially if we show no concern for how we get it!) If it's pleasure we want...again, there is plenty out there to grab hold of. But when we place power, money, pleasure, and our selves before our God, they will gradually drag us down.

Legend has it that blues singer Robert Johnson met the devil at a crossroads in rural Mississippi.

Standin' at the crossroads, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroads baby, dark gon' catch me down
I believe to my soul now, po' Bob is sinkin' down

I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please.

(From Crossroads, Robert Johnson, 1936)

Every temptation in our life is a crossroad. A crossroad where one sign says, "This beautiful world belongs to God and so do you. Follow this path and learn to use all these beautiful things for the purposes they were created for. The sign on the other road says your life and your body are yours. Do with it as you wish. The world too is yours. Use it to your pleasure.

This foundational temptation is very real, hard to overcome, and we will lose battles. So our hope comes from learning to fall down on our knees at every crossroads and ask for mercy, salvation, transformation. Our hope comes from learning how to worship with our lives. For ⁸Jesus

answered the devil, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

When we have chosen the road leading to God's holy temple, the devil is looking a bit more pitiful but has not yet given up. He suggests that we try one great fall from God's holy temple. After all, you are a child of God who says God's mercy saves, so why don't you prove it? Jump off the foundation of God; jump away from the church and Christ's teachings; jump off and live for yourself and have some fun for a while and let's see if God can save you.

This final invitation to the abandonment of God and self-destructive ways is ultimately where temptations lead. And friends, not having the strength of Jesus, we will fall. God's angels may pick us up in mid-air but they may also let us feel some real pain for the sake of knowing which direction we are heading!

A harsh landing against stones is ultimately what happened to Tiger in his fall. He has apologized completely and is seeking the help of therapy, his family and friends. These are critical steps in the right direction but these powers which are higher than himself cannot always be there in times of trial. So I pray that he learn to believe and rely not on himself but on the power of God's Word.

The same holds for us. In all things Jesus clung to God who was the source of his strength and so must we. And because we are not nearly as close to God as Jesus was, we must rely more heavily upon the family of God.

Shaun Groves wrote the following:

Send the armies and darkest hours
Every flag, every sword and power
I will never turn
I will never turn
No, no, I will never turn from You

Only your name's on my soul
Only your cross left to hold
Only your love's in my veins

Only for your fame (from "Only" on the album White Flag, 2005)

Sometimes it will feel like the darkness is closing in. But when we remember that the name of Christ is on our soul; that we can cling to the mercy of the cross; that God's love is our lifeblood; and that everything is his rather than ours, all the armies and darkest hours do not have a chance of turning us away from Our God to whom belongs all the power and the glory now and forevermore. And God's people say...

