

Good Shepherd Episcopal church

The Episcopal Church, Granbury, Texas

February 21, 2010

I Lent

Today's gospel reading, and to a great extent the readings from Deuteronomy and from Paul's Letter to the Romans, is about taking sides... about putting God first in our lives...about remembering whose we are and what has been done for us...about declaring our loyalties.

I want to look primarily at the gospel reading today, the temptation story, and try to understand a bit of what it is all about. At first glance the temptations of Jesus seem strange, so unlike our temptations: the temptation to take things, to use people, to ignore God. But the temptations of Jesus seem so unrelated to ours. Make bread out of stones? Leap from the temple? Worship Satan to gain the world?

We can't really conceive of these kinds of temptations as having anything to do with what we experience. Yet the temptations of Jesus are ours, for Satan (here the personification of all that is evil, that internal inclination to make wrong choices) is as much with us as it was with Jesus. There is that inclination to develop life-destroying attitudes and beliefs in ourselves; to develop in us those things that will take us further and further away from God's love till one day we discover that we have no faith at all, that we are people without hope and without purpose, that we are, in short, completely lost, living only for today, living only for ourselves.

Evil becomes incarnate in what we believe about ourselves and God. What is evil saying in the temptation story that we heard today?

If You are the Son of God ... If You are ... If You really think You are -- then prove Your power through a self-serving miracle?@

If you are really loved by God, prove God's care by leaping from the temple?@

If you really want to change the world - if that is your mission - do it the way that I show you.@

If You are the child of God , then why can't you, why don't

you...@

Think about that voice for a minute. The voice Jesus wrestled with as he wandered through the wilderness that we so often walk through in our lives, the wilderness not of sand, rock, and bush, but the wilderness of the soul... the wilderness of a world that does not care, of a world that does not provide anyone an easy time of things but rather is coldly indifferent, if not openly hostile to us and to what we want and feel.

How often have we struggled with the kinds of words in ourselves that Jesus heard at the end of his forty days of wandering; that voice speaking inside our minds and hearts, whispering quietly, but insistently:

“If you really are a child of God, would you be acting in this way?”@

“If you really are a child of God, wouldn't you be able to overcome your weaknesses, do the good you intend, and straighten yourself out?” “If God loved... really loved you... would God treat you this way? Would God let you suffer?”@

“Are you really, really a child of God? Is God really there for you? For anybody?”@

“Isn't there an easier way? A better way? Better than this. Better than now?”@

We hear the voice of doubt and that doubt takes two major forms, doubt in the goodness of God, and what is commonly called “self-doubt”, that doubt that questions who we are and what we are about, not for the purpose of improving ourselves or causing us to turn to God, but for the purpose of tearing down whatever good may have been built up in us and causing us to wonder if there is any point in our continuing to live as Christ would have us live. Is there is any point in trying to be faithful?

One of the biggest occasions of doubt that arises in our lives is related to the reality of temptation, and to the fact that we all too often succumb to it. I think we all know the feeling. We promise God that we will pray more often, and then we find ourselves so busy, working, watching TV, running to meetings, that we end up praying less than we had before. We promise God that we will not be so impatient with the annoying people in our lives, and then we find ourselves, a few days later, more annoyed with one of them than ever before. We try to do something, or to not do something and

we fail, and we feel guilty about it. We feel at times that we are complete failures as human beings let alone as Christians.

Have you ever said to yourself, "If I was really who I believe myself to be, then I would not be tempted."?

Self doubt, soul destroying doubt, it is a common thing, like the other doubt that comes our way, the doubt that says to us when we are in trouble, "If God were real, if he was really with me, then I would not be doing what I am doing." "If God really cared, then I would not be in this mess."

God does care. God cares like a parent cares for his or her child as they are learning to walk. First God holds our hands and calls to us to move toward him. Then, as we gain strength God lets go, but is there to catch us when we fall and to encourage us to walk and to learn how to do the many other things that make life so good.

Temptation is a reality of the Christian life. It is there for two reasons. The first reason is this: The world around us is not a Christian world. It does not support us in our struggle to live the life of Christ. I mean, imagine a world where living like Christ was the standard. This is not a pleasant thought for those who love darkness.

The second reason for temptation is this: God wants us to choose Him freely. God does not want you, me or anyone else to be obedient robots. He wants us to be whole human beings who freely love him and others, and to be people who, in every way, are made in His Image. That requires something for us to choose, something for us to do, something for us to believe.

There was a man who was asleep one night in his cabin when suddenly his room filled with light and the Savior appeared. The Lord told the man He had a work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might. This the man did, day after day. For many years he toiled from sun up to sun down, his shoulders set squarely against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock pushing with all his might. Each night the man returned to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his

whole day had been spent in vain. Then the man began showing signs of discouragement. Thoughts began to shape in the man's mind such as: "You have been pushing against that rock for a long time and it hasn't budged. Why kill yourself over this? You are never going to move it." The man was beginning to believe that the task was impossible and that he was a failure. These thoughts discouraged and disheartened the man even more. "Why kill myself over this?" he thought. "I'll just put in my time, giving just the minimum of effort and that will be good enough." And so that is what he planned to do, until one day he decided to make it a matter of Prayer and take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "Lord," he said, "I have labored long and hard in your service, putting all my strength into doing that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock a half an inch. What is wrong? Why am I failing?" To this the Lord responded compassionately, "My friend, when long ago I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to me, your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so? Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back brown, your hands are callused from constant pressure, and your legs have become massive and hard. Through obeying my word you have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. You haven't moved the rock, but your calling was to be obedient, to push and to exercise your faith and trust in my wisdom. This you have done. I, my friend, will now move the rock."

Each of us is called to be obedient, to push and exercise our faith and to trust in God's wisdom. In the doing of this it is not a sin to be tempted, it is often a part of God's plan for us, that same plan that led to the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness where he was tempted. It is not a sign that we are lost, that we are beyond hope, when we succumb to temptation and do those things we ought not to do and fail to do those things we ought to do. If that were so it would mean that the cross of Christ accomplished nothing, that his sacrifice on our behalf means nothing. That most certainly

isn't the case.

God's word does not come back to him empty. His love is not without power and impact and effect. As a loving parent helps his or her child back to their feet when they stumble and fall, so God helps us back to our feet when we fall and call out to Him. He lifts us up over and over again - until we finally are strong enough to go on to the next lesson.

What God wants from us is not that we be perfect, but that we strive to be that way, that we give it our best and keep on trying. The temptation is to give up and abandon faith in God and the idea that we are made in God's image for a purpose and a reason.

Don't give up. Have faith. Our lives answer the question of whose side we are on. God is on our side, and the compromises the world offers are not life giving, life affirming.

Do not give up faith in God because of the temptations you feel nor because of the ones you give in to, but instead get up on your feet, turn again to God, and begin walking once more. Remember the word that God has given us, the word of faith that says simply, "You are forgiven." and "You are mine".