



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087

408.739.1892 • FAX: 408.739.3491

From the Pulpit

Sermon: “When No Means Yes”

The Rev. Dr. Jim Bennett ~ February 21, 2010

Luke 4:1-13

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Today we find ourselves at the beginning of Lent, that season of reflection and preparation that takes us on a the journey to the events of Holy Week. Liturgically speaking, the story of Jesus’ temptation is starting point of that journey. Each year, the lectionary reading for the first Sunday of Lent is the story of Jesus’ temptation. The temptation narrative appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so the lectionary cycles through those three, but one of those versions is always a suggested text for this first Sunday of Lent; partly because this early episode is a foundational event for understanding the trajectory of Jesus’ ministry, and partly because temptation is so central to the struggles we face as we live out our Christian faith.

Jesus’ temptation occurs as the second event recorded about his adult life, following immediately after baptism; these two events set the character of Jesus’ public ministry. Together they form the “yes” and the “no” that shape his ministry and mission in the world. Jesus’ baptism forms the crucial background for understanding the temptation that follows, for it was at his baptism that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and that the voice of God announced: “you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22). Then, led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus departs immediately for the wilderness where he then endures 40 days of fasting and temptation by the devil, culminating in the three temptations recorded in our

reading today. As he says “yes” to his baptismal identity as God’s son, Jesus says “no” to the temptations that taunt him in the wilderness.

Of course, saying “yes” to God and “no” temptation makes it sound so easy. Sure, we face clear temptations every day: should I eat a chocolate bar or celery sticks for snack? Should I buy myself a 50” flat screen TV to watch the NCAA basketball tournament or give my extra cash to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering? Temptations to indulge our desires for material gain, to fill our libido, or to fuel our pride are very real. And in these instances we have little doubt about right and wrong, even though we all too often succumb to the wrong. But as Jesus experience in the wilderness suggests, temptation can also be a far more complicated struggle, and the ability to say “yes” or “no” more difficult.

Consider the temptations that Jesus faced: they’re not some easy or sleazy gain that stands in complete opposition to Jesus’ call or identity. Rather, each temptation drives right to the core of who Jesus is and his role in the world.

In the first temptation, the devil begins exactly with the identity announced at Jesus’ baptism. *“If you are the Son of God,”* the devil suggests, *“command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”* It’s a brilliant test, and not just because Jesus was really hungry after forty days of fasting. The temptation works so well because on the surface it seems consistent with who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish. The devil doesn’t say, *“hey, forget that Son of God stuff and come be something else instead.”* Rather than denying Jesus’ identity, the devil affirms it right from the start. *“Since you are the Son of God, why don’t you go ahead and take care of your hunger—and everyone else’s as well! You’re here to help people, aren’t you? Look at the hunger around you: consider the poverty, the arid land here in Palestine that makes the food supply unpredictable and bread a real treat. You have the power to solve this for once and for all! So why don’t you go ahead and do it!”*

This is no invitation to debauchery, or to self-evident ruin. Rather, it comes under the guise of good, as an invitation to improve the condition of the very people Jesus came to serve. It was a

temptation that seemed in keeping with not only with Jesus' power, but also with his identity. Given the extent of Jesus' compassion for the suffering in the world, surely this must have been a tempting proposition: a quick end to one of the most fundamental causes of human suffering.

But Jesus responds with a resounding "no." As good as it might be to alleviate the world's physical hunger, doing so would have perpetuated an even greater spiritual famine. The devil tempted Jesus with what was good, and even what was needed, but not with what was best. Compassion for people's physical needs was central to Jesus life and ministry, but this compassion was only the beginning, not the end of his ministry. Jesus was not immune to people's cry for food, and would later perform miracles to feed large crowds of hungry followers. But he always insisted that such food alone was insufficient, and that only the spiritual bread and divine reconciliation that he offered could fulfill humanity's greatest hunger and its deepest longing. The temptation that Jesus resisted was agreeing that physical things could satisfy people's ultimate needs. Nothing in this world can replace our ultimate dependence on God. This is the paradox of our human condition: we are indeed dependent on the things of the world to survive. We cannot live without food; but food will not save us. And so in this season of Lent we are called to reflect upon, and perhaps give up, things that tempt us to ignore our dependence on God.

The second and third temptations follow much the same pattern. A skillful and shrewd tempter continues to play on Jesus' identity as Son of God and Messiah, trying to seduce Jesus towards dependence on the ways of the world and away from obedience to God.

In the second temptation, the devil tempts Jesus to fulfill the world's expectations for the Messiah: that he would be a military hero, throwing off the yoke of oppression to inaugurate a new political kingdom. *"Forget the wondering about the countryside trying to persuade reluctant and stubborn people to follow you. I can hand them to you in one foul swoop. C'mon, If you are here to be the people's Messiah, it doesn't matter how you do it."* Of course, when the devil insisted that Jesus bow down and worship him as the necessary trade for this power, he undermined his own case, acknowledging that worship is greater than worldly power. Jesus

concluded, and reserved his worship and obedience for God alone. And so, in Lent, we reflect upon, and perhaps even cast off, those things that lure us away from worship toward the pursuit of worldly power. Like the example of Jesus' steadfast faithfulness, Lent calls us to keep before us our baptismal identity: to remember who we are, and whose we are.

In the final scene, the devil seems to be conceding much of the battle to Jesus, as he takes him up to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem: *"ok, clearly you really are the Son of God, you're not going to betray that relationship and calling, so why don't you get on with your work and prove it to the world? Throw yourself off the temple and let God send his angels to rescue you. Once everyone sees that they'll know you're from God and you can do whatever you want.!"*

Once again the devil was tapping into messianic expectation, in this case a popular legend that the messiah would come on the pinnacle of the Temple. It's another attempt to suggest that Jesus should fulfill the world's expectations for him. But once again Jesus rejects the offer to take this seemingly easy way to help the world recognize him. Of course it's not that Jesus doesn't trust God's promise of protection—his willingness to die on the cross would make clear. But Jesus shows that he has a better understanding of scripture than the devil's selective proof-texting. From this moment of temptation up until his death on the cross, Jesus makes clear that God's protection comes as a response to obedience rather than as some sort of magical performance that can be tested in front of easily impressed audiences.

Together, these three temptations are rich in their particular possibilities for reflecting on our journey of faith, ranging from the various forms that temptation can take to considerations of the role scripture can play as a guide and compass for that journey. But during this Lenten season, it may be most helpful to keep our eyes on the big picture:

The path that follows Jesus, the "yes" of our baptismal vows, is a path that leads into the wilderness and through the thicket of temptation, not around it. We can no more avoid it than could Jesus himself, who got no exemption from the temptations of the world. But this is also our reassurance. As the author of Hebrews explains, Christ is not one "who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness," but rather "one who in every respect has been tested as

we are.” Any claim that the Christian life can steer clear of wilderness, temptation, and testing is unfaithful to scripture. There is no free pass out of suffering and temptation in this world. In the same way, the forty-day journey of Lent, much like Jesus’ forty days in wilderness, is not some super-spiritual, out-of-body escape route from the predicaments of our human condition; rather Lent, like the journey of faith more generally, calls us to consider how we will navigate and respond to the reality of our lives, temptations and all.

The legacy of temptation is that it never goes away, nor should we expect it to. Throughout his ministry, the three temptations of Jesus’ time in the wilderness persisted: people continued to call on Jesus to provide more bread, to overthrow the Roman rulers, and to prove his identity through miracles. Temptation didn’t end for Jesus, and it won’t for us. As one of my seminary professors said: “Our pilgrimage is like a spiral ascent; for we never cease to meet the temptations we have met at an earlier stage of life.”¹ But the good news that as we press on in our journey of faith, in and out of the wildernesses and temptations of life, the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ keep us moving up the spiral in spite of ourselves. Because Jesus succeeded in conquering temptation, he ensured that our failures will not be the final word. Though we start in the wilderness, we will end up at Easter!

In working through his temptation, in confronting rather than avoiding temptation, Jesus declared the kind of Messiah he would be: faithful, obedient, and utterly dependent upon God. As we confront and conquer temptation and affirm our baptismal identity, we too, declare what kind of Christian we will be. In the end, Jesus emerged from his temptation with a stronger sense of who he was and who his baptism had called him to be. May it be the same for us.

¹ Diogenes Allen, *Temptation*, p. 131