

THE SECOND TEMPTATION

Sermon, February 28, 2021

Texts: (Matthew 4:5-7), Mark 8:31-38

(These story in these first few paragraphs was told during the Time With the Children – slc) Thirty-one years ago today, February 28, 1990, I was on my honeymoon; we were staying in a bed-n-breakfast inside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, near the Damascus Gate *(we had traveled on our own; no tour group or package, a rental car, and a little handbook entitled Israel on \$45 A Day)*. That day my new wife and I decided we would drive to Bethlehem, which on the map was a fairly straight shot on a highway connecting the two cities. On the map included with our little tour guidebook I noticed a side road that looked like a good short cut, and thinking it might be a more scenic ride, I suggested we try it. My wife, probably affected *(adversely)* by the honeymoon glow of naïve trust in her new husband, said, "OK." To make a long story short, we got hopelessly lost ... in the occupied West Bank. Not realizing one can go from the first world to the third world in a matter of moments over there, I was all turned around and disoriented in a maze of twisty, winding and sign-less roads, dirt paths, tiny villages, Bedouin encampments; roads shared by sheep, camels and groups of men on foot staring at us. I should mention 1990 was right in the middle of "the First Intifada", an 1987-1993 uprising of the Palestinians, a time of very high tensions manifested by boycotts, store closings, rock-throwing, blockades, even riots with occasional gunfire ... and the loss of approximately four thousand lives over the course of those six years

Eventually we happened upon a military vehicle parked along the side of one road containing four or five Israeli soldiers. I pulled up, got out of the car and approached ... the driver and occupants looked at me with a rather deadpanned "what are you doing here" gaze as I asked if anyone spoke English. One soldier responded, "A little." I explained to him we were lost *(to which he replied, "I know.")* and asked for help ... after a long *(and somewhat awkward for me)* silence, he conversed briefly with the other soldiers, said something into a radio receiver, and then said to me, "Follow us. Closely."

I did.

Ann and I then received a blue-light flashing military escort through the maze of windy, camel-and-sheep-filled roads and villages *(and the accompanying stares of several Palestinians on foot along the way)* back to the main highway. When we arrived, the soldier got out, approached our car, and said, as he pointed in the appropriate directions, "Bethlehem: That way. Jerusalem: That way. Don't go this way again *(as he pointed with a wide circular motion to the area we just left)* unless you have THIS." He then walked over to the military vehicle, and rapped on his bulletproof windshield. Three lessons to be learned: (1) Short cuts can get you lost, (2) Short cuts can place you in real danger, and (3) when you realize you are lost, ask for help and follow, and follow closely, the one who will show you the way.

Last week we talked about Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness, and how the devil was tempting Jesus by ostensibly offering Jesus "short cuts" to help Jesus achieve His own good goals ... but to use devilish means to attain them. Jesus is the Savior, and His deepest longing is His desire to save the world and to do the things a Savior does ... to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to have as many as possible follow Him in the ways of life abundant and full. And I'm convinced these were the longings the devil was appealing to in his tempting. The first of the temptations *(well, the actual first temptation was to question the word of God: see last week's sermon)* of Jesus was perhaps the most primal, which is the temptation to do whatever it takes to satisfy your appetite. "Scratch your itch, fill your belly, satisfy your urge. That's what's important in life, that's how you find fulfillment." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Jesus says, there is something more important in life than just satisfying desires and urges, and that is learning, hearing, trusting, heeding, obeying, every word of God ... and THEN satisfying our desires accordingly! But that's last week's sermon.

The second temptation in Matthew's account is found in chapter four, verses 5-7: The devil then took Jesus to the high pinnacle of the temple, and says, "Jesus, why don't you throw yourself down to the ground?" The devil quotes from Psalm 91 -- "And he will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." What is so tempting about the devil trying to get Jesus to jump? Well, many things, but in part this was a temptation to base belief on the spectacular, the stupendous, and frankly, the safe. "Do something really spectacular and stupendous and grand to impress the people, then you'll really gather a crowd, Jesus, and that'll prove who you are AND prove God is real. Besides, when you step out in faith, God won't let you get hurt!" *(which is another tenet under the theological category of "Ba-LO-ney," but that's almost another sermon)*. However, belief that is wholly dependent upon the spectacular and the stupendous and the safe is rarely genuine. Faith isn't all about being safe. Besides, the Biblical reality is that people seldom came to genuine belief because they witnessed one of those spectacular miracles. True belief means changing the way you live, and submitting to a higher authority than your appetites, and that almost never happens just because of a stupendous miracle.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus asks His disciples two questions, and then He makes a promise. The first question is, *"Who do the crowds say I am?"* The second question is, *"Who do you say I am?"* And the promise is, *"Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."* There is often a challenging and difficult and, at times, "unsafe" path between the giving of the right answers and the receiving of that promise. There are no short cuts. This talk from Jesus of rejection, suffering, pain, self-denial and difficulty ... that isn't what we signed up for. We want miracles, wonders, blessings, and safety! We want to save our lives; after all, that's why we want a Savior, right? We don't want to *lose* our lives to save them. However, if that's the case, that only means our answers about Jesus were not as right as we thought they were.

Our Gospel reading takes place over two and a half years into Jesus' public ministry, just a few months prior to the crucifixion. Jesus looked at His disciples, and said, *"Who do the crowds say that I am?"* They responded by saying, *"Jesus, they've seen what you can do. Some say you are John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."* Now, for a Jewish crowd that was the most affirming thing about Jesus they could say. They were saying Jesus was divinely inspired, He was from God. All of which was true. It isn't actually that the crowd had the wrong answers, but the answers they had were not as right as they thought they were. Like that crowd, you may have heard a lot about Jesus. You may have even learned a lot of right answers about Jesus. But there comes a point when Jesus grows impatient with the well-rehearsed catechism answers of the church crowd, and He will look deep into your own heart and soul and He will say, *"Yes, but who do you say I am?"*

In every life there comes such moments when you have to move from Question One to Question Two ... from Jesus, the right answer of the theologians, preachers and Sunday School teachers, to Jesus, Who wants to know what you **really** believe. *"Who do you say I am?"* What does it mean to call Jesus Savior and Lord when faith is hard? When things aren't so spectacular? When the miracles aren't happening? When it isn't "safe"? What does it mean to call Jesus Savior and Lord on those hard days, on days of tears and confusion, when you are simply exhausted with the way it is? For it is on those days we move from Question One to Question Two. It is on those days Jesus will look into your heart and ask, *"Now, who do you say I am?"* On those days, the paramount question, the question that is most important, is not what do you *know*, but what do you *believe*? Do you *believe* Jesus is the Christ? Will you still trust Him as Lord and Savior? Will you still be a person of virtue, honor, truthfulness when it is hard? Will you do the right thing? Will you follow Him with integrity through thick and thin, on the difficult paths?

Our ministry here is dedicated to nurturing belief in the salvation of Jesus Christ, both "once and for all" salvation and His ongoing salvation in the midst of how it is. I have spent these last almost-25 years not only with you in this pulpit, but also in hospital waiting rooms anticipating the joys of new birth, and I've been with you in hospital waiting rooms dreading the prognoses of terrible illness. I've been at weddings where couples are full of fun and hope about the future; I've been in intensive care units or homes where couples have said their final goodbyes in this life. I think I've been privileged to conduct over 150 baptismal celebrations of new life at this font (*plus 23 adult baptisms*); I've also been privileged to conduct two hundred commemorations of dearly departed life from this chancel and also many other services in the funeral parlors of our area. I've been with you in the too-quiet homes, the gravesides, and the many other hard places of life. And as these flowers in the chancel today attest, you've been with me in those hard and difficult places as well. Such times bring us to the really important question about belief. *"Now, who do you say I am?"*

Right after Peter says, "You are the Christ", Jesus starts talking about suffering and rejection and being killed. We read Peter began to rebuke Him. It was then that Jesus turned and said, *"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things and the ways of men."* Now, I don't think he was actually calling Peter Satan. I think he was saying, *"You know, Peter, you sound a lot like that fellow I just spent forty days in the wilderness with, the one who was trying to tempt me to take the easy path, to use insidious means, to take the short cuts to reach My good goals."* I think Jesus was basically saying, *"Get back in line; Peter, because you are out of line! Don't get ahead of Me, don't run away from Me, don't walk counter to Me. Get BEHIND Me, and follow."* Peter is not being banished or cast out. Rather, he is being invited into discipleship, a discipleship which gets in line behind Jesus and follows, come what may ... and not just when things are spectacular and safe.

Again, Jesus asked His disciples two questions, and then He makes a promise. The first question is, *"Who do the crowds say I am?"* The second question is, *"Who do you say I am?"* And the promise is, *"Whoever loses his life for me will save it."* There is a long and challenging and at times difficult path between the giving of the right answers and the receiving of the promise. There are no short cuts. Christian faith is so much more than thinking or believing **something about Jesus**; it is **believing** Jesus, and it is about "losing" your life by getting in line behind Him and His will for your life. Calling Jesus Savior and Lord is never just the right answer. It is either salvation, which grabs hold of your life each and every moment, or it is meaningless. He wants us to follow Him, to get in line and stay in line behind Him ... through better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, but here's the wonderful twist ... death will never do us part.

For the promise is whoever loses his life for His sake will save it ... now and forever.