

THE THIRD TEMPTATION

Sermon, March 7, 2021

Texts: Genesis 12:1-5; Luke 4:5-8

"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you, and you will be a blessing." That, in essence, was God's directive to Abram. The Old Testament text this morning is pretty straightforward; it tells us God said, "Go!" and Abram *went*. There is no mention of lingering, no mention of hesitation, no mention of bargaining, no mention of Abram's weighing other options. God said "Go!" and Abram *went* ... along with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their people and possessions ... from Haran to Canaan, a distance of some six hundred miles. Now I'm sure it wasn't all that simple or immediate for Abram to comply; all of this took certainly some time and much planning ... people just do not up and leave a community and a home and country, places where they have roots and responsibilities and commitments, just like that! When I relocated here over 24 years ago, I moved just half that distance, three hundred miles, with "all" my people ... all three and a half of them (*Hannah was still in the womb*)... and even with all the conveniences Abram did not enjoy, such as modern transportation, instant communications, hotels and restaurants along the way, Mayflower moving trucks and paved interstates, it was a lo-o-ong process which took very much planning. And as I approach Abram's age, the thought of packing up and relocating seems even more daunting!

This section of the Bible is notoriously short on such details, but it doesn't mean those innumerable necessary details involved in making such a relocation didn't take place. I think the Bible wants to emphasize a basic and crucial point ... the point being that for Abram, his faith was no static thing! Abram's faith was dynamic, active and all about *doing* what God called him to do when God called him to do it; Abram's faith was about obeying the directives of God **so**, among other things, he could **be a blessing** to others for generations to come! By the way, when God says to Abram, *"... and you will be a blessing to others,"* that might be taken as a promise AND it might also be taken as part of the divine command, as much as the divine directive to *"Leave your country."* In other words, *"Where I am sending you, do your best to be a blessing, not a burden, to others ... go out of your way to be a blessing to people!"* I believe God calls and even commands all His people to proactively work to be a blessing to others; I also believe we best do that when we put our faith to work and readily obey what the God we worship directs us to do. When we put our faith to work, when we obey the God we profess to worship ... more often than not, we wind up being a real blessing to others as well as to ourselves. Conversely, when we **don't** put our faith to work, when we aren't obedient to God, we wind up being not much a blessing to anyone, including ourselves.

Paul talks in his epistle to the Romans (*chapter 4*) about Abraham being "justified" by faith. I've talked about this before, but my take on this is that we tend to think of this word "justified" in somewhat legal terms, but in its simplest terms, to "justify" means to *get or put or make* something right. Think of when you **justify** the margins of a document on the computer; what are you doing? You are trying to get everything lined up and neat and as "right" as it can be in accordance with an upright, straight and consistent standard. **That "margin" is the standard.** In a similar sense, when faith is exercised, it "justifies" us ... it works to *align* us and our deeds and our lives according to an upright, straight and consistent DIVINE standard. Our lives start to become better aligned with how the God Who loves us and created us would have us live, so that we, too, might go on and be a blessing to others, as well as to ourselves. This is a crucial dimension of how Abraham was "justified" by his faith. A classic debate within Christendom over the centuries has been over the issue of "Faith or Works;" i.e., are we justified or saved through faith alone, or by some combination of faith and works, or by works alone? Well, the short answer is that it is not an either/or question, for the mark of being a genuine believer is having a faith that goes to work! *A FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS A FAITH THAT DOESN'T WORK.* And a faith that doesn't work is *no* faith at all. Genuine faith not only believes *in* God, but *believes* God, and **aligns life accordingly** and goes on to do what it can to be a blessing to others. A faith that does *not* seek alignment with the marginal line of God's holy Standard is a faith that just doesn't work.

So, Abram's faith is all about trying to get his life *justified*, lined up, aligned with the expressed will and holy standards of the God he worships. The place to which God sends Abram is inhabited by people who don't believe in his God. Quite often, faith means exercising trust in God even when you are in the minority, when you are alone, even when no one else around you believes God exists (*or lives as if God exists or matters*). It's significant that Jesus is alone during this time of temptation in the wilderness.

In the time we have remaining I want to focus on this third temptation (*the second temptation in Luke's order; we looked at the first two temptations these past weeks*). The devil took Him to this high place, showed Him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world, and said, *"All of these have been delivered to me, but I'll give it all to you if you will*

simply worship me." And Jesus answered, *"It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.'"* Notice Jesus does not say, *"Well, what do I care about the kingdoms of the world? I don't want them."* No. Jesus would love to have the kingdoms of the world. He wants to **save** them, and everyone in them. That was His whole reason for being here, that the world might be saved through Him. So, this is not a temptation about *ends*, this is a temptation about *means*. This is a temptation about how to go about getting the really good thing Jesus wanted. What the devil offered was an easier way, a quicker way, a short cut, a "practical" way ... albeit a diabolical way ... to help Jesus achieve His desires. *That's* the temptation.

I think it's safe to assume that since you are in church today or worshipping with us on line that you probably aren't intent on worshipping the devil. Of course not. So many of you here have lofty ideals, high hopes; you are people who have committed your lives to good things, like raising children, serving the community, working in hospitals and schools and businesses, and you have given so much time and energy to this church and to other charitable organizations. This is what you want to do. This is how you've chosen to spend your lives, contributing to things that are good and upright and purposeful and even holy. It is highly unlikely the devil is going to show up and try to tempt you by asking you to, say, go rob the Greenwood Credit Union across the street, or manage an adult web site, or some other ostensibly nefarious endeavor. No, he doesn't necessarily ask us to give up on our high purposes or our great ambitions or good hopes or lofty visions. What the devil asks is that we simply be, well, *realistic* about what it's going to take to get the job done. After all, he claims, this world has all but been delivered to him ... that evil and corruption and fraud is now so systemic and intrinsic, so much a part of the system, that if you're going to succeed in the "real" world, well, you'll just have to get flexible and comply with how it is (*on a somewhat related note, listening to the news these past weeks I'm increasingly worried about the "whether" ... the "whether" being whether or not our country is going to make it!*). He insists the ends will justify something of an unfortunate, less than idealistic means you will just have to resort to. If you really want to make changes, if you really want the resources to raise your children well, if you really want to have all you need to provide for your loved ones, if you really want to stay in political office, if you really want to _____ (*fill in the blank*), well, that can be arranged. All you have to do is make a little deal with the devil. Just make a few compromises along the way, a few quick genuflects in his direction, a little bending the knee to evil ... nobody has to see or know about it.

Often we take the devil's deal even if we don't fully realize it. At first we just, oh, tell a little fib on that application because we really need the job. Or we "fudge" that line on the tax return because we want more money to, uh, give to the church. Whatever it is, time and again we just turn a blind eye to things we're asked to do or things around us that we instinctively know to be wrong, not "normal," and even evil. Before long, though, we realize there is so much wrong around us that we're starting to become blind to that which is really right and true and good. But by then it's too late to make changes; we're in too deep, we have too many obligations, and now the best we can do is muddle along and try to cope with how it is. Now it is good Presbyterian doctrine to say that we live in a fallen world, and, tragically, that means that sometimes we are stuck with a choice between two evils. Yes, we are sometimes caught with bad choices in life. But if we're honest, we know that really doesn't happen as often as we like to think. We excuse ourselves by saying the world is too complicated to make good choices. But the most important choice we have to make is to decide whether we will worship and obey God ... or will we bend the knee to evil, just to get by.

Take one quick glance at the world around us, and it's clear the devil has plenty of power. The deal he wants you to make is for you to allow him to help you get what you want ... he'll use his power to help you do that, all you have to do, he says, is simply give in. Just a little. No big deal. *"Stop being so idealistic; who do you think you are, anyway, the son of God?"* We sure would like to meet our good goals. And we've learned now that we have to be realistic about what it takes to get things done. So maybe we rationalize it's better to make a deal or two with "how it is." But eventually we realize the deal costs too much. Bending the knee to evil will always lead to disappointment, hurt, destruction. It does not satisfy. "Devil's food" is always carcinogenic.

If you find that you've made a bad deal or two with "how it is" with the world, the path to satisfaction is not to settle for how it is, nor is it to make more bad deals or more compromises, as if you could somehow manage your way out of this situation (*which is roughly akin to applying for more credit cards to help you get out of debt*). No, the path to freedom is to worship God, and worship Him alone. Live by His word; determine to justify and align your lives by the divine standard, bend the knee to Him only. Then you will be increasingly unafraid to say no to things that are wrong. It doesn't matter how old you are, it doesn't matter how many compromises you have made with how it is, it doesn't matter how deep you are in ... today is the day to say no to the devil's lousy deal for your life, and put your faith to work.

And when we put our faith to work, when we obey the God we worship ... more often than not, we wind up being a real blessing to others as well as to ourselves ... and for generations to come.