

March 9 2014

Scripture Lessons ~ *Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

Sermon        *Tempted*

Much of what we consider to be traditional about Lent is taken from this passage in Matthew's gospel concerning Jesus' temptation in the wilderness just prior to his baptism at the Jordan River. Now first Jesus' temptation is connected with his baptism and in the early Christian Church, Lent became a time of study. It became a time of preparation for baptismal candidates. Secondly Jesus' temptation lasts for 40 days, and that harkens back to the 40 years that the children of Israel spent in the wilderness. And probably even to the 40 days that Noah spent upon the ark. As it does refer to Lent itself, excluding the Sundays as those are not counted in those 40 days of Lent. Third, Jesus wrestled with temptation in the wilderness, and traditionally Christians have been asked to do the same thing. Through self-examination and through prayer, and finally Jesus' fast and Jesus prayed in the wilderness during his temptation and ever since fasting and prayer had become a hallmark of the Lenten season for all of us in the church. The only thing that you would have to do would be smart enough to give up broccoli and not chocolate during the course of the Lenten season!

Traditionally too, biblical commentators classify Jesus' temptations as coming in three areas, where we as human beings seem to be the most vulnerable. First of all the temptation to turn stones into bread corresponds to our constant temptation to put our trust in our material possessions rather than in what is truly lasting in this life. Secondly the temptation to rule over all the kingdoms of the earth becomes our human tendency to abuse power when we have it rather than using the power that we have been given for the common good. And finally the temptation for Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, reminds us of how enamored each of us can become with that which is loud, that which is flashy, that which is sensational in life, instead of that which is quiet, constant and considered. I find what is the most fascinating about this passage is how scripture at this time of course the old testament, the Hebrew scriptures, is used by both Jesus and the devil in the passage. It is kind of like a cosmic battle of wits between the personification of everything that is adverse to God, versus the personification of everything that is in harmony with God. And interestingly both know their Bibles and quote the Bible word for word. Both can use the Bible skillfully to argue and to make a point, and both seem perfectly sensible in their use of scripture to bolster those very points that are trying to be made. Now of course I

am not going to argue too much about the way that Jesus used scripture in the passage, but the whole thing does go to show us if the devil in the story can proof text, if the devil can misuse and twist scripture in this passage it isn't a far stretch to remind ourselves that we as human beings can and do misuse scripture in the same way frequently often to suit our own purposes along the Christian way.

And that is why it is ever so important not to believe every single person who pulls a verse out of the Bible on the television, or the radio or the internet and purports to tell us what that verse means and what that verse applies to our lives. And that is why it is equally important to do our homework and to read scripture by knowing about the historical context, something about what kind of literature that book in the Bible is, something about its author and the author's purpose, and even something if we can possibly manage it about the original language in which the scriptures were written.

A lot of that is my job, but a lot of it is your job as well to be vigilant as individual Christians yourselves. And it is essential that we as commentators and scripture translations fully and humbly help us make these ancient words relevant in the modern day, knowing full well that we are never going to do these things perfectly as human beings.

I have heard this so often, but it isn't enough to say that this is just all common sense, just don't worry about it, just read it and it will be fine. Or that any one person or one group has a corner on truth in the Christian community. And neither is it valid to say that you can do these things as well by yourself, in isolation as you can with a group, because I believe very strongly reading and studying and applying the Bible has to be done in the context of not only our Christian community but the larger Christian community as well so we can hold each other accountable for our words and for our actions for our interpretation as we try to apply them to our lives day by day. Now all of this said, Jesus in today's passage quotes from Deuteronomy three different times in the passage. First with the temptation with bread, he quotes Deuteronomy 8.3, with the temptation for power he quotes two passages Deuteronomy 6.13 and 10.20 and finally with the temptation to the sensational he quotes Deuteronomy 6.16, but right back at him is the devil interestingly enough quoting from Psalm 91 verses 11-12. A wonderful passage "he will command his angels concerning you to protect you for on their hands they will bear you up so you will not dash your foot against a stone". And I guess the question is, so what is wrong with that? What is wrong in using what is so beautiful a comforting passage of scripture in the face of danger or fear or injury as the devil seems to do in this story? My answer would be to that "everything is wrong with it, everything because what the devil is doing here is exactly what we have been asked not to do, that is taking scripture totally out of its context and out

of the reality of the situation and twisting it to fit a pre-conceived and in this case a harmful purpose in this encounter with Jesus.

Remember then that we are not free to throw even the most wonderful passage of scripture around and use them as we please in any and all cases and context. And neither are we free to use God as sort of a cosmic puppet expecting God to come to our immediate aid no matter what we do to hurt ourselves or what we do to hurt other people around us in this life. There is no denying that God is a loving God, the is a just God, a God that will walk with us in any and all circumstances during this journey that we call life, but God also all along the way to focus on three important things in this passage, I think spiritual things – First of all focus on those things which are of a lasting importance in life, and secondly focus on using our power to influence to help others and never to hurt them when we have power in our lives and finally to focus on seeing God in those everyday things that we so often miss. Like, the angels right here in our midst sitting to our right, sitting to your left, sitting in front of you and behind you, angels that are still willing to be God's hands to bear us up daily on our journey of faith. Three temptations, three attempts to get Jesus to believe that God wasn't really a factor in his life and three failures on Satan's part. What do you say in baseball? Three strikes you're out! And together we say, Amen.