

“The Gift of Discernment”

Sermon on Sunday, March 10, 2019

Based on Luke 4: 1-11

I came across this quote from singer/songwriter Tom Waits the other day that I thought was pretty funny. Waits, who loves to play the broken-down underdog, said, and perhaps you have to hear it with a deep Western twang, “Don’t you know there ain’t no devil, it’s just god when he is drunk.” Well, I have wondered sometimes whether Jesus, in the early stages of his long fast in the wilderness, was trying to figure out who in the world he was dealing with. A drunken god, maybe? I mean, he had just been baptized. He was full of the Holy Spirit, and by that spirit he was led into the wilderness, the place where his ancestors had encountered God back in the days. Wasn’t this going to be his glorious orientation for ministry, a holy retreat, God teaching him what to teach us? Wasn’t this experience supposed to help him grow in faith, with words of encouragement and wisdom, with deep insights and discoveries about the nature of God? Retreat centers in the church these days are usually nice places, close to nature, conducive to self-reflection, a “positive environment,” as they say.

Well, this retreat went into a different direction, and by the end of the 40-day period Jesus knows who he’s dealing with: not God, not even a drunken god, but the incarnation of evil. I suspect we have all seen a movie or two, a thriller perhaps, that featured characters who found themselves trapped by people they originally thought were their friends, but turned out to be enemies, who seemed to have their best in mind when it was in fact the worst. The husband who secretly plots the murder of his wife... The friend who turns out to use the friendship for a secret agenda... The undercover agent who seems to protect the country when he or she is actively working on its destruction... And you know, some of these movies are based on stories from real life, and sometimes the movie makers do their very best to soften the original story, in order to make it more palatable to the movie audience. Because some deceptions that occur in real life can be quite disturbing!

Led by the spirit, Jesus enters the wilderness and hears the voice that approaches him with words from the Holy Scriptures. That voice seems to have good intentions, initially. Matthew and Luke are the two gospels that offer us the long version of the temptation story with a specific dialogue. And while the temptations and the evil intentions are pretty obvious to us, and while we wouldn’t fail to see who is behind it, I suspect what we are offered here is the de-coded version. In other words, I believe that Luke was trying to help us see the evil intentions behind each temptation. In real life, in the fast pace of situations we encounter, it’s not always that easy.

So, I decided to uncover the temptations for someone as good and well intentioned and uninterested in evil as Jesus. Sometimes all it takes is changing the words a bit, and lo and behold, it’s tempting! In the first round, the voice essentially asks Jesus to take care of himself. “Eat something, Jesus, you’re famished! Turn this stone into bread! Take care of yourself! If you don’t take care of yourself, you won’t be able to help others. “Self-care” is a buzz word in pastoral training. Those who take care of others, they say, need to take care of themselves or they suffer burnout. “Eat right, exercise, spend time with your family...” That, by the way, is good for everybody. Do you eat right? Do you exercise? Do you spend time with family or close friends? Those are all good things. Heck, after 40 days, Jesus probably looked like he had anorexia. And when this voice told him to eat something, what was wrong with that?

The second temptation sounds more like a clear-cut power grab. Jesus is shown the glory of the entire world and hears the voice, "This will all be yours if you worship me..." We wouldn't fall for that if we possess a little bit of decency. But change the words a tiny bit and things sound more clean. What if the voice tells Jesus that he will be given all this power in order to save the world, to eliminate poverty, to cure cancer, to end all wars, to eliminate evil regimes? Would Jesus say "no" to the enticing prospect of changing the world for the better?

The third temptation is one that may have some appeal to more serious religious people. "Prove your faith," the voice challenges our Lord. And as he had done three times before, the devil quotes scripture, this time Psalm 91. Our hymnal includes a song about this psalm, "On Eagles Wings." There, you will also find the exact words the devil is quoting here, "For to the angels God's given a command to guard you in all of your ways; upon their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone." Who knows what song the devil put onto Jesus ear in order to get him to jump...

So, the moral of this story is this: good people will not be tempted by bad things, generally speaking. At least not initially. And since I am speaking to a lot of good people here in this church, people who are giving and caring, people who have a pretty good moral compass, it is especially important for us to decode the kinds of temptations that sound good, but aren't so good in the long run. In this scripture text, Jesus and also Luke - the author of the gospel, have done the decoding for us. The way it is written it becomes increasingly obvious that the devil was trying to grab Jesus' soul, despite all his scripture quoting.

But here is the catch: in real life we have to do the de-coding. And that requires more than intelligence. Intelligent people are more likely to fall for temptations because they tend to rationalize; the tempter is able to use their intelligence against them. Fending off temptations that sound good in your moral universe is harder; it requires wisdom and spiritual integrity. In the life that I live I encounter temptation rarely as a clear-cut choice between good and evil, but more often as a choice between good and not so good, between staying on God's path and going down a slippery slope into a spiritual no-man's land. For instance: how do we lose so many young people to activities such as sports and other programs that are all good and helpful for their development? We say, this sport will teach my child healthy competition, will give them physical exercise, dealing with loss, celebrating victory. It's good for them, and it is! This extracurricular activity in school will help my child get into the college of his/her choice. It's good for them, and it probably is! This music program is so good and so high quality, and it has two night rehearsals every week. It is good for my child, and it probably is! But wait a moment! Our suburban families have so many choices between good programs, programs that are often demanding and time-consuming, that we allow our children to have little or no time for worship and focused spiritual training, and then we wonder why they don't understand scripture and why they don't "get what it means to be a Christian and why they go their separate ways as they enter adulthood.

What Jesus used in the wilderness was the gift of discernment, which allows us to consider the spiritual consequences of our choices. It wasn't intelligence that saved him. It wasn't logic. It was knowing God intimately that gave Jesus this gift of discernment, knowing the spiritual consequences of things that may sound good. And so, let us remember, this season of Lent is about getting to know God intimately - through prayer, through meditation, through listening, through spending time in the presence of the Holy One, so that we may have the gift of discernment when we most need it. And that time will come. **Amen.**