



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

FEBRUARY 14, 2016
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy:
Tempted by Love
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

Our Lenten pilgrimage this year is guided by the inspired words of Joyce Rupp who wrote:

The cosmos dreams in me
while I wait in stillness,
ready to lean a little further
into the heart of the Holy.¹

We sense the anticipation and trust conveyed in Rupp's verse as she opens herself to whatever she might learn about God and herself during the Lenten season. We, too, will open ourselves to pay attention to the ways in which God experiences our world. Trusting God enough to risk falling into the arms of the Holy, we pray that we will learn more about ourselves and how we live in the world.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we read about Jesus' experience in the wilderness, a time when he certainly leaned into the heart of the Holy. Listen to Luke's telling of the story:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The Tempter said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the Tempter led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the Tempter said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the Tempter took him to Jerusalem, and placed him

¹Joyce Rupp, "Lent 2001," available online at: www.joycerupp.com.

on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the Tempter had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Luke 4:1-13

The Tempter, of course, is testing Jesus' relationship with God and does so by poking at any glimmer of self-doubt Jesus may have about who he is. "*If you are the Son of God,*" he says, "Prove it!" And, not only are you who you say you are but is God who you think he is? Are you willing to put your relationship with the Father to the test to find out for certain?

First he played on Jesus' self-understanding and physical need. "You are famished from having fasted all this time. If God could turn a lump of clay into a remarkable human being such as yourself, surely the Son of God could turn a stone into a delicious loaf of bread. If you are who you say you are, prove it!"

It was the first of many tests Jesus would face to live up to his calling. The scribes and Pharisees would dog him with questions and accusations which were intended to prove he was not at all anyone special, much less the Son of God.

One of the weakest spots in the human makeup is our sense of self. I have often thought that if we could create a healthy self-esteem in each and every one of us, we would avoid many of the problems in our world. Most of us who make it through adolescence do so with a few physical scars and numerous emotional scars from trying to prove that we are someone we actually are not. We want to fit in, to measure up, to be cool and accepted. That need does not stop when we turn twenty-one. In many ways the stakes get higher for more and more challenges to our sense of self require greater and greater risks. If you are who you say you are or think you are or wish you were, then prove it! The results are often not very pretty.

Fortunately, Jesus understood that his being the Son of God had nothing whatsoever to do with his ability to magically transform rocks into rolls. Jesus affirmed that he was indeed the Son of God by not playing the Tempter's game. His sonship was based, not on his ability to do tricks, but

on the fact that the Father had laid claim on him. He had no need to prove that fact.

In the same way, our identity is firmly established in the fact that we are children of God. When the Hebrew people were settled in the Promised Land, they were instructed to take an offering to the place of worship. When making that offering, they would recite their story which indicated who they were and what God had done for them. They would begin by saying, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor." They were speaking of Abraham whom Paul considered the "Father of the faithful" (Romans 4:9-12). They would recite the ways in which God had repeatedly delivered them and provided for them throughout their history. From the stories of our beginnings in Genesis through the Gospels and the writings of Paul, God's claim on his people is unmistakable. God created us and, despite our insecurities and sometimes bad choices, God has not given up on us. God claims us as his own and will not abandon us. Who we are is nothing we have to prove.

Jesus had no doubt whatsoever about his identity as the Son of God or of his relationship with the Father. He rebuked the Tempter by reminding him that life consists not of feeding the body alone but in nurturing oneself through the Spirit of God.

Doubts and desires are not easily deterred and neither was the Tempter. Knowing that power and wealth have turned many a head, he took Jesus on a trip which provided a Google-earth view of the world and all of its kingdoms. He offered it all to the poor carpenter from Nazareth if he would only worship him.

How many of us bought tickets for that one and a half billion dollar lottery jackpot last month? I admit I did. Obviously I did not win. Neither did you—or you still owe the church 20% of your earnings! I know that each of us genuinely thought about all of the good that could be done with that money. But we also know how that kind of wealth immediately changes your status in life. If you desire, you can suddenly have tremendous influence over other people. You can give away or invest your money and some people will do anything you ask in order to be on the receiving end. They will be kinder, more deferential, and obsequious. Such influence can result in great good, but it can also do tremendous harm. And, as most often happens according to statistics, when all that money is gone in five years, you will be broke, dejected, and considered a failure to the extent that no one will seek your opinion on anything. Fame and fortune can be fleeting.

The recent movie about Bernie Madoff reminded me of this truth. Bernie Madoff worked hard to build a successful investment company. He became rich, powerful, and influential in the business. He made a lot of money. He made a lot of money for other people. Unfortunately, he did not really make the money, he stole it by using the money from new investments to pay current investors. He robbed people of money they trusted him to invest for them and thought nothing of it.

I think it is safe to say that Mr. Madoff proved that what Jesus said is true, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6.24). Some of his investors lost their planned retirement. Some of them lost their children’s education funds. Charities lost the source of funding which would enable them to continue helping other people. In the end, he lost everything. His property was seized. His company was shut down. He went to prison. His wife cut off contact with him. One son died from cancer. The other son died from suicide. “All these things I will give you if you will only worship me,” the Tempter promised.

The wonders and power of the world are enticing and heady, but Jesus knew that those things do not belong to the Tempter anyway. All true authority belongs to God alone who created the world and continues to sustain it. When we recognize that anything we have ultimately belongs to God, we treat our treasure and our influence with great care. Jesus’ answer to the Tempter’s offer was, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Jesus proved that his fidelity was to God and God alone.

The Tempter’s final test was the most severe for it sought to test, not Jesus’ self identity or loyalty, but God’s love of his Son. The mismatched pair journeyed to the top of the temple, the symbol of God’s presence. Using Jesus’ own device, he quoted scripture—Psalm 91—and challenged Jesus to jump off the temple because if God is who God claims to be, he will not let his only Son be harmed but will swoop him up in the arms of angels.

It is one thing to question our own sense of being or faithfulness to God; it is quite another to test God’s faithfulness toward us. As children we frequently do things that will reassure us that our parents are watching out for us and keeping us from harm. Even the simple game of peek-a-boo is a child’s way of checking to be certain that her parents never take their eyes off her. As we grow older, our means of testing our parents’ care grows more complex and even dangerous. Breaking curfew, bending the rules, even running away from home are all ways we check to be certain that parents love

us enough to establish safe boundaries and will come get us when we cross them.

Surely we do the same with God. The story of Adam and Eve in the garden is but the first example of the ways we play hide-and-peek with God. There is much to learn from that story, but one of the primary lessons is that while our choices do have consequences, God does not abandon us. Scripture tells us that God provided clothing for the now shamed couple, provided a means for meeting their needs, made it possible for them to partner with God in every aspect of life. No matter how much we test God's love for us, God always passes with flying colors.

Jesus reminds us that there is no need to test God. Why distress God in order to play into someone's hand? Just as he was confident in the Father's claim on him, so was he also confident in the Father's love and care for him. Besides, tempting love is cruel and shows lack of respect for and trust in the other. Jesus the Son of God knew that he would ultimately rest in the loving arms of the Father and preferred that over even the gentle hands of the angels.

This initial story from the ministry of Jesus lies at the heart of Lent. It bears witness to the sense of self Jesus had and the trust and respect he held for God the Father. It occurs to me that as we lean into the heart of the Holy, we can learn a great deal about our relationship with God and with one another. Especially on this day, I think we discover that Luke's story is, in some sense, a Valentine of sorts, a clear message to the Father of the Son's unfailing love. It is also a template for the ways in which we can live out our love for the people in our lives.

When we have a stronger sense of ourselves and get rid of the insecurities which plague us, we can trust other people to accept us as we are. We have no need to try to prove our worth. Our value lies in our being a child of God who is richly blessed. We discover that our relationships can be honest and forthright since we dispense with game playing and trying to impress other people with possessions or positions. Finally, we have no need to test someone else's love for us for we can learn to trust other people and rely on their care of us. The best Valentine gift we can give someone we care about is a secure and confident love which matches the love they offer to us.

Like Jesus, may we lean into the heart of the Holy as we walk our journey of life and discover the confident love that is centered in the One who created us and sustains us today and for every day to come. Amen.

February 14, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this season when our spiritual focus is turned inward, O God, we become uneasy with the realization that you see us as we really are and know us completely. Our actions and opinions are often short-sighted because they grow out of regret for the past, a need to control the present, or fear of the future. Where our perspective is limited or we lack clarity about decisions or purpose, we often fail to put our complete trust in you.

But we have the assurance that you are our Creator who discerns our thoughts and the deepest longings of our hearts. You number the hairs upon our heads and often meet our needs before we are even aware of them. You share our joys and know the dark places of our lives that we would rather hide from you. We are grateful, O God, that you comprehend all that we do and all that we are, and yet, you do not give us what we deserve but share with us out of the abundance of your blessings. You know our hearts, and even still, you bestow compassion instead of condemnation. For every expression of your grace and every good gift which comes from you, especially for the amazing love you have given for our sake, we offer our thanks and praise.

We know, O God, that in spite of our limitations of resolve and resources, you have entrusted the care for this world and for one another into our hands, promising that you will supply our needs. Help us to see all the ways that you are at work in our world, especially in the lowly and small, in the meek and poor, in the vulnerable places where we would not think to look for you. We confess that our busy schedules and myopic agendas often prevent us from recognizing the wonder and delight that are all around us, so open our eyes to be surprised by beauty in unexpected places and everyday encounters and to grasp the wonder of your presence all around us.

Grant us the vision in this season of Lent and beyond to look deeply at our own lives while seeing the rest of your children through your eyes of compassion. Teach us to look at those whom we might judge or about whom we make assumptions because of differences in language or creed or custom or opinion as your beloved children and the neighbors we are called to serve. Help us to recognize in every face we see, every circumstance we encounter, every possibility that is ours, your Spirit which is at work, empowering and transforming us and all of creation. Grant us the grace to lean in closer, Holy God, that we might hear the tender beating of your heart and there find new life.

In the name of the One whose life, death and resurrection have given us a vision of joyful and abundant life now and eternal life with you, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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