

“Jesus and Temptation”

Genesis 9:8-17, I Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

II of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”

Jeffrey Window panel “Temptation” – “Him Only Shalt thou Serve”

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February 18, 2024

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent I, February 18, 2024, dedicated to Jane Carter for her 90th birthday, to Marilyn Potts on her 90th Birthday, to Jill Jeffrey Kingsley, the last living grandchild of Joseph and Cecila Jeffrey, all the family, living and in heaven, and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.

Amen.

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A young woman, interviewing a colleague of mine for a paper she was writing on world religions, came with a list of questions. After going through questions like, “How does your denomination understand God?”, “Who is Jesus for you?”, and “Does your church believe in a heaven and hell?”, the young student came to her final question, **“What is the central message of your faith?”**

He answered each question as best he could but found the final question lingered with him long after she left. In fact, it never left him. He couldn’t shake it. It has always held onto him (found in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian Blount and Gary Charles, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2002, pp. 36-37).

“What is the central message of our faith?”

Perhaps the best answer to this question is in our text from Mark 1:9-15 today. Still dripping wet from his baptism in the Jordan River with John, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the same Spirit who was present at his baptism. There he is tempted by Satan, with wild beasts and attending angels. This is all Mark gives us. While Luke and Matthew spell out the temptations in great detail, Mark does not. So – while you look at the panel on the front of your bulletin – let me salt and pepper a little Matthew and Luke on the Mark story.

To begin his mission, Jesus has a showdown for 40 days with Satan in the wilderness. Through Satan's temptations, Jesus confronts his own worst demons in the desert as Satan asks him to turn stones into bread, offers him the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will but worship him, and challenges Jesus to jump from the top of the temple to prove that God will save him. Satan challenges Jesus to act like God and demonstrate God's power over the world and over life and death. Satan tempts Jesus to dazzle him! But, this is not the mission of Jesus! Jesus was not a devil dazzler!

Martin Luther wrote on this passage:

“Throughout his life, Jesus conducted himself so humbly and associated with sinful men and women, and as a consequence was not held in great esteem, on account of which the devil overlooked him and did not recognize him. For the devil is farsighted: he looks for what is big and high and attaches himself to that; he does not look at what is low down and beneath him. Therefore, he never really saw Jesus.” (Philip Yancey quoting Luther in *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1995, p. 71).

Wow! The Devil never really sees Jesus. That is Powerful and true!

Rather than worrying about dazzling the devil, now wet with sweat and famished from 40 days of fasting, Jesus exits the wilderness and speaks his first words of public ministry. Jesus says through his dry lips and famishing body, *“Repent and believe in the gospel.”* God has been unleashed and is now

on the loose in the person of Jesus. In these words of Jesus, there is no distant hope, no other worldly predictions and proclamations, things are going to change right NOW. Let us brace ourselves for what's coming NOW.

This is the central message of our faith – **Metanoia! Metanoia** is everything.

Metanoia is a word that is shouted not whispered by John and Jesus – although what happens in its path can come from the whisper of God in your ear and in your heart. It is a word full of meaning – a word that takes us to the central message of our faith. It has two primary meanings.

In the Hebrew scriptures, it means “*to turn or return.*” It directly relates to ancient Israel’s exile in Babylon and their return home. It literally means, “*to embark on a journey of return to the ‘homeland,’*” to the Holy Land where God is found. But you are not only traveling to the place where God is found you are traveling WITH God on the return. The entire journey is Metanoia.

There is a second meaning which comes alive in the Christian scriptures beginning with Mark 1:14-15. It means, “*to go beyond the mind we have.*” This phrase is both evocative and provocative. The mind we have is acquired from socialization experience of time, of people, of place, of race, of gender, and gender identity and orientation, and so much more. We are all enculturated in ways that shape us, by people who shape our thinking and our actions. “*To go beyond the mind,*” we have means to see and act in a new way – a way shaped by God known decisively in Jesus. **This is repentance.**

Although the Bible speaks of repenting of our sins, the emphasis throughout scripture is not so much on contrition, sorrow, and guilt, it is on turning from them and returning to God. “*Repentance is about change. It is not primarily a prerequisite for forgiveness,*” writes Marcus Borg in *Speaking Christian* (drawn from Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, Harper One, NY, NY, 2011, pp. 157-159).

While that may shock some of you, it is the TRUTH. Repentance is about returning. It is about turning around. It is about a new mindset. Repentance

is about change. It is not – in Marcus’ words – simply a prerequisite for forgiveness.

And what is the new way that “the gospel” is calling us to? What do we see when we turn around?

We see Love. We see the face of God and the face of God is **Love. If it’s not Love, it’s not God.**

It is Love that calls Jesus to the waters of baptism in the Jordan River with John. It is Love that comes from the voice of God – “*You are my son whom I LOVE!*” It is Love that pushes the Holy Spirit to push Jesus out of the water and into the wilderness. It is Love that battles evil and the presence of Satan. It is Love that gathers the wild beasts to stand by Jesus’ side during the trying times in the wilderness. It is Love that gathers the angels and their Love offers protection for Jesus. It is Love that Jesus is calling us to turn around and see, feel, and experience and share. It is Love that fuels the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

LOVE is the central message of our faith – and we get to love through Metanoia – through “turning around,” through “returning to God,” through “going beyond the mind that we have.”

I believe **Love is everywhere** – if we only have the perception to see and feel it. For example, in Genesis 9:8-17, God places “a bow in the sky” as a reminder of the Covenant of God with God’s people. The Rainbow sign is a sign of God’s love for humanity.

As Walter Brueggemann writes:

“The ‘bow’ is likely not understood in romantic ways, nor with an accent of political pluralism. Rather, it likely refers to God’s bow (and arrows) as a weapon of war, hostility and destructiveness. God suspends the ‘bow’ in the heavens as a gesture of disarmament and as a promise not to be the aggressor or the adversary of humanity.... It is God’s gesture of love, peace, and reconciliation. God intends to be at ‘peace’ with God’s world, recalcitrant though it has been. The ‘bow’ is not

a message for humanity, It is a reminder to God to be faithful and everlasting as God has promised to be” (Texts for Preaching, Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky, 1993, p. 193).

The Rainbow is like God’s tab-it note in the sky – “Hey God – Remember to Love them today in spite of all your evidence not to.” The bow constantly reminds God to remember to be loving to people who are always forgetting to be loving to people.

In I Peter 3:18-22, Peter reminds us as followers of Christ to love as completely as He first loved us. Against the opposition of a hostile culture, Jesus walked into Jerusalem armed with gentleness, kindness and reverence and laid down his life for the life of the world. In total and complete sacrificial love – a love which overcame principalities and powers – he died, was laid in the tomb, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and lives with the angels and the power of God to love eternally. Peter reminds us in his letter to always maintain a hopeful view of the world in spite of all the evidence to give up. Isn’t that essentially what true love looks like? Love perseveres when all other evidence points to giving up and simply laying down and dying. Love lifts us up when there is no logical reason to be raised up.

Returning to Mark, we are reminded of Love in the wilderness. While Matthew and Luke’s Gospels love telling complicated stories of Satan’s temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, Mark is more interested in talking about the wilderness than temptations. Mark is focused on the wild work of Jesus and the wild beasts and the wild angels that attend to him there.

If you were in the wilderness and you knew that the wolves were your protectors and the bears were your friends, if you knew that wildebeests and the scorpions were watching out for you, and the rattlesnake and coyote had your back, you could face all the heat and cold, you could take on any spiritual and physical hardship knowing “these wild beasts are ministering to me.” They got my back!

And then, when the beasts were resting from the scorching noonday sun, if you knew the spiritual heavy artillery of angels were on your shoulders giving you cover from the oppression and temptations of the wilderness heat, you could muster all the courage and strength in the whole world to face the devil and anything he puts in your path to trip you up and hurt you. Just like Jesus, “Be gone Satan” would roll from our lips with ease and sureness with such love as this.

The God of Love who sends the bow as a reminder to Godself to keep the peace with people who destroy life with a callous disregard, the God of Love who sends wild beasts and angels to protect and defend his beloved son in the wilderness, the God of Love who gives us a Savior who is gentle, kind, just, compassionate and one who lays down his life for us out of his complete and absolute love for us, is a God we can trust and follow.

LOVE is the central message of our faith. And we GET TO LOVE through Metanoia – through *“turning around,”* through *“returning to God,”* through *“going beyond the mind that we have.”*

Remember – the central message of our faith is LOVE!

I pray for you this week – that the Wild beasts will minister to you (even though they appear to be your pets). I pray that the angels of God be on your shoulders knocking down all the lovelessness that comes at you from behind or straight on (even as they appear in human form). May our God of Love, love and care for you in ways you never saw before or ever imagined possible. Amen.

