

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Staying the Course”
January 17, 2010
Luke 4:1-13

“Our Father who art in heaven. Hallowed by Thy name. Thy kingdom come. They will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...amen.” Do the words sound familiar? OK, sure they because they are part of the prayer virtually every Christian learns. Most of us I would guess, once we learn it pay little attention to the particulars. We repeat it and trust in its power. The issue becomes that if we take a closer look at the prayer almost all of it makes sense except one short sentence fragment. I say that because having taught the Lord’s Prayer a number of times it is the one part that stops everyone dead in their tracks. And what part is that? Lead us not into temptation. People have a real problem with that line. Why we ask would God want to lead us into temptation. God is supposed to protect us. God is not the tempter...that is someone else. Why would Jesus teach us to pray such a thing? Why? Because is part of his life experience.

Our story this morning is about the newly anointed CEO of God’s world restoration corporation being led into the wilderness in order to be tempted. Yes, that does seem like a really odd thing to do. Surely God would want to protect Jesus from the powers and principalities of this world in order that Jesus be able to carry out his duties. But no, God, through the Holy Spirit does just the opposite. Jesus is sent out to face the tempter, the one who had messed with humanity it the beginning. And not only that, he fasts during the 40 days making him even more vulnerable to temptation. So why would God do such a thing? Unfortunately scripture gives us no answers...but the best I can surmise is that is a sort of spiritual proving ground. The wilderness for Jesus, as it was for the Israelites leaving Egypt, as it was for prophets, is the place where God’s people prepare themselves for the tough times ahead. It is the proving ground where secure faith is forged and all excess spiritual baggage is left behind. Through this experience Jesus is made ready to accomplish his mission.

The question becomes though what then does this have to do with us? We are not in the wilderness. We are not fasting...well at least I am not. We are not facing some red suited pitch fork carrying opponent. So why is this passage of any concern of ours? It is a concern because the temptations that Jesus faced are the ones every follower and every community face when we attempt to be those who are working to release, renew and restore the world. Granted, on the surface few of us would be tempted to turn stones into bread, take over the world or leap off of tall buildings trusting that God would catch us. However, at the heart of each of these un 21st Century-like temptations are the three temptations that can and do derail Christ centered communities from becoming life changing and world transforming churches. My guess is that as we look at them you will see how that is true...not only for ourselves, but for every church family.

Temptation number one is that we think it is all about us. Jesus is hungry. He has been fasting and so the rumbling in his insides has become apparent. He also possesses great power. He is probably capable of doing the miraculous...of turning stones into bread. And that is the temptation that is offered to him. Jesus, use your powers, for your need. Remember, if you are traveling with a small child and the air-pressure leaves the cabin put the mask on yourself first. So Jesus, take care of number one and then you can take care of the world. After all Jesus it is all about you! You are the chosen one. This is the heart, if you will of every other temptation that faces us. We want to believe that this is all about us. We want to make sure that our spiritual needs are met before we have the time and money to meet the needs of others. We see this that when push comes to shove what is the first thing in a church budget to go? Missions. What is often the first thing to go in our own budgets? Charity. I am not pointing fingers folks because I am part of we. This is the temptation to turn stones into bread...to make it all about us.

Temptation number two is that we want to take the easy way out. Jesus as we have noted had come to Release, renew and restore the world. What better way to do that to be in charge. It is sort of like the Cowardly Lion in the Wizard of OZ who sings, "If I were in Charge of the Forest." We see all of the ways we could make the world better. That was what Satan offered to Jesus. All Jesus would have to do was to worship the tempter and then Jesus could be the big boss and make all the changes he wanted. There would be no flogging, no cross and no brutal death. It would be the easy way to fulfill his mission. As 21st century Christians we are tempted to do the same. We look for the perfect pastor who will bring people into the church. We look for the perfect music director who will impress people. We look for the perfect program what will quickly turn nominal Jesus followers into dedicated disciples. We look for the perfect advertising program that will make people beat down the doors to come in. we want to ignore Jesus words that remind us that releasing, renewing and restoring the world is hard and dirty work.

Temptation number three is to think that we are more important than we are. Jesus is challenged to leap off the top of the Temple and trust that God's angels would catch him. While I have to say this appears to be a rather odd challenge since there is no bungee cord attached, it is in the end an invitation to vanity...to ego. It was tempting Jesus to believe that he was so important that regardless of what Jesus did that God would save him. It was an invitation to distraction from the call to be the humble one who would give his life not for ego, but for the salvation of the world. Where I have seen this temptation played out in churches is that they come to believe that God loves them so much, and that they are so important to God, that regardless of what they do, or in many cases don't do, God will make sure they survive and thrive. It is a sense of, well we have been around for years, and even though we are not releasing, renewing and restoring the world, we are bullet proof. Nothing can happen to us. Unfortunately presbytery records are filled with the histories of closed churches that once thought they were indispensable.

I wish I could say that these temptations were once upon a time temptations, but as we have seen that is not true. Even Luke tells us this when he says at the end of the story, "When the Devil finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." It is a powerful reminder that these most basic temptations never go away, they merely come to us in different forms. The question then becomes for us, how do we avoid falling into these temptations? The answer I believe is that we keep our eye on the prize. We do what Martin Luther King did as he helped to lead the Civil Rights Movement. To an outsider the Civil rights Movement might appear to have been a series of disconnected walks, sit-ins and actions of civil disobedience. But a closer look reveals that King and his lieutenants carefully crafted every action for the specific purpose of reaching their ultimate goal of equal rights, access and education. There was no wasted energy. This is our calling as well. We are called to focus our energies and efforts on our mission to release, renew and restore God's creation. So here is the challenge for us as a church family, to ask ourselves, "How is what we are doing accomplishing our mission?" If we are willing to do that which each and every mission and action we take, not only can we avoid falling prey to the temptations we have discussed, but we will impact the world for God in a significant way.