

*The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
"And is Better Than Or: Cross Training"  
Rev. Amy Morgan  
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*Psalm 121*

*I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come?*

*2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

*3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.*

*4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.*

*6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*

*7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.*

*8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

*2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

*3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

*4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

*5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,*

*6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

*7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;*

*9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*

*10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

*11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

Okay, generation check: raise your hand if you know “Bo knows.” No, not Sonny Bono. I mean, “Bo knows baseball. Bo knows football. Bo knows surfing.” In the late 80’s, Nike started making a shoe that could take an athlete from the baseball field to the football field, from the gym to the track, from biking to hiking. And what better spokesman could Nike find for these shoes than the incredible Bo Jackson, an amazing athlete who played professional baseball and then switched over to the NFL. He hit 500-foot home runs and ran over linebackers. Nike launched this whole series of commercials featuring Jackson and his excessive compliments of his own shoes. Bo Jackson’s fame was brief but glorious, so if you know that Bo knows, you’re likely right about my age or maybe a bit older.

Bo Jackson didn’t invent cross training, but he certainly was able to capitalize on it in a way that was remarkable. He proved that not only was it advantageous to train in more than one sport, it was possible to excel in several disciplines.

No, Bo Jackson didn’t invent cross training. In fact, you could say he learned it from Jesus. Today’s text, the traditional reading for the first Sunday of Lent, shows Jesus pulling a Bo Jackson-style, all pro, cross training triumph.

You see, right before Jesus is led by the Spirit out into the wilderness, does anybody remember what happens? Just before this, Jesus is baptized by John. There’s this voice from heaven, the voice of God, saying “This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” And the Holy Spirit descends like a dove from heaven, and then whooshes him out into the wilderness *to be tempted by the devil*. Now the word *tempted* in Greek might be better translated as *tested*. As a scientist tests a hypothesis or a crash test discerns the safety of a car, Jesus was being put to the test. And the word *devil* that is used here means one who “misleads, diverts, or discredits.” So you have this adversary, this one who is trying to discredit the Son of God and divert Jesus from his mission. And this is all set up so that Jesus can be tested.

So the question is: what is Jesus being tested on? Again, let’s look back at what just happened. Jesus has experienced his identity as the Son of God; he has claimed his identity as part of the Trinity; and he has been baptized like any human in need of reconciliation with the divine. In short, he has had this full, rich, experiential understanding of both his human and divine natures. This is the epitome of Jesus as “fully human, fully God” as we profess in the Nicene Creed.

And now it’s time for a test drive. Jesus is being tested on how he will go about living in two natures. He has to play for both teams, experience two kinds of existence. In other words, he has to cross train. He can’t just glory in his divinity and dabble in humanity. He has to really pour himself into both natures and see how they intersect.

Now, the benefits of cross training are threefold:

First, cross training helps with your physical endurance. If you’re a runner lifting weights, your muscles will take you farther. If you’re a biker who swims, your legs will last longer. The exercise of different muscle groups gives you more overall endurance in whatever sport you’re participating in.

So Jesus faces his first cross training test in the form of an endurance test. The devil, the tester, says to Jesus, “look, you’ve endured forty days and forty nights of fasting. Isn’t that enough? Why don’t you just fall back on your divine powers, turn some stones into bread, and eat up?”

Now, there’s nothing wrong, necessarily, with Jesus turning stones into bread. Jesus turns water into wine. He feeds thousands of people with just a few loaves and fishes. He provides a miraculous catch of fish for his disciples. Miracles involving food and drink are perfectly in order for the messiah. But here he is being tempted to fall back on his divinity for self-satisfaction. This may seem extreme, given that he has been fasting in the wilderness for forty days. But if Jesus cannot limit his self-preservation in this circumstance, how will he endure the cross?

You see, Jesus is not only cross training, working out his divine and human natures. He is also training for the cross.

The second benefit of cross training is reduced risk of injury due to the strengthening of different muscle groups. When the tester comes to Jesus a second time, saying, “show off your divinity by risking your life,” Jesus lifts up the law of God designed to beneficially order human life, saying “do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Again, defying death is not the problem in the second variation. Jesus walks on water and miraculously disappears from an angry mob hoping to hurtle him off a cliff. As we see in the resurrection, the power of death is no match for the Son of God. But if Jesus throws himself off a cliff and knows he can survive it, what is the point of the cross? Sure, die on a cross. We know you’re going to be all right. It’s no big deal.

If Jesus doesn’t reduce his risk of injury, if he doesn’t cross train by truly living into a human sense of mortality, then the cross loses its meaning. It becomes a pointless show, a spectacle rather than a saving event.

Finally, cross training helps an athlete attain better overall performance in their primary discipline. So Jesus is fully human, fully God. But Jesus is part of the Trinity. Jesus is the Word of God who was in the beginning with God and who sits at the right hand of the Father. So, I’m going to say that divinity is Jesus’ primary discipline. Divinity is to Jesus as baseball was to Bo Jackson.

And so when the tester offers Jesus power and dominion over all the kingdoms of the world, how is that really tempting? I mean, if Jesus is God, doesn’t he already have it all? What is the devil really able to offer him?

Here, I think Jesus is struggling with just that question. There is the divine temptation to scoff at the offer of something God already possesses as the creator and ruler of the universe. And there is the human temptation to power. In allowing himself to struggle with that human temptation, in

experiencing the helplessness of the human condition that leads us to struggle for dominion over one another, to desire to play god, Jesus conditions his divine nature. Because of this struggle, we know that God understands what it is to want, to desire, to be less than, to be subjugated. Jesus will not accept power over all the earth at the cost of worshiping anything other than God.

And it is this kind of humility that gets Jesus to the cross. If he chose in an instant to rule the world, if he chose to give his loyalty to anything other than God, then he could not pray “Lord, let this cup pass from me; but not my will, but yours be done.” When that tester at the end of Matthew’s gospel echoes the words of the devil, saying, “If you are the Son of God, take yourself down off that cross,” Jesus wouldn’t have been able to resist. His performance of selfless love - enduring betrayal, beatings, taunts, and a humiliating and painful death – would have been impossible had he not had this opportunity for cross training, training for the cross. He doesn’t serve himself, he doesn’t make a spectacle of himself, he doesn’t save himself. He shows human limitation and divine resolve.

Because Jesus isn’t human *or* divine. He is human *and* divine. He is the God who has the power to save, to redeem creation. And he is a human who can truly suffer and die.

What if we only had *or*? What if Jesus had been fully divine *or* fully human?

If he was only God, he wouldn’t have been tempted. For God, what is tempting about food or physical well-being or temporal power?

If he was only human, he wouldn’t have been able to resist temptation. The human need for self-preservation and the human inclination toward pride would have proved the devil’s temptations irresistible.

If all we have is *or*, the whole thing falls apart.

I like *and* better. I like a God is almighty and powerful and loving, *and* a human who can feel and hurt and understand and struggle and overcome. This is our hope. It begins here, in the desert, with the *and* of Jesus.

But we are tempted to go for *or*, as deficient as it is.

Because if we want *or*, we can choose the kingdom *or* the cross. This is so tempting.

You see, if we choose just the kingdom, we can rely on God for everything. We can say with confidence “God will provide; God will protect; God will persevere.” In the kingdom of God, every blessing is a gift from God. This is the prosperity gospel that we hear preached from so many televised pulpits says that God wants us to be successful and happy and that all we have to do is trust God (and possibly put up a little money for the televangelist’s ministry). This is also therapeutic deism, where we believe in God, and want our kids to believe in God, because that way God will be there when we need something, when we need a divine solution to our problems. But the notion is that God does it all. Nothing is required of us.

Believe it or not, there are plenty of people who would choose the cross instead. There was a survey taken a few years back looking at what Christians in America actually believe, and in this survey 42% of American Christians said they believed the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is found somewhere in scripture. It isn’t, by the way. It’s one of the many phrases coined by William Shakespeare that has been woven into our cultural fabric. People who choose the cross do so because it puts the power of God in the palm of their hand. If they suffer for the gospel, if they pray and fast, if they sacrifice – they will be rewarded. The world is ours to change. And while this sounds like the more difficult of the two possibilities, it is attractive because of the control it offers us.

The kingdom *or* the cross. All God *or* all us. God provides *or* we persevere.

But that’s not how it is. It is the kingdom *and* the cross. God *and* us working together.

We’re told in Paul’s letter to the Romans that we “did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

We are children of God, *and* children of Adam. We struggle with the human condition of sin, *and* we are set free from the slavery of sin through Jesus Christ.

We are children of God – loved and protected, secure in our salvation. We are still human beings who fall into sin, who miss the mark, who wander away from God, and who need reconciliation. We have to live, as I’m fond of saying, in the already-but-not-yet of the kingdom of God. Because we too are not only cross training. We are training for the cross. “We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

The kingdom *and* the cross. God provides *and* we persevere.

God promises to be faithful, to provide for us and love us and care for us. Through Jesus Christ we are children of God. *And* we must persevere so that we can participate in the redeeming of creation, in the building up of the kingdom of God, and in the love, justice, and peace of Christ in all that we do and say and believe.

I like *and* better.