

***THE LURE OF LIMITLESS LIVING***

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

March 10, 2019; 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

***“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...”***

Luke 4:1-2a

I’ve never been to the Holy Land. Maybe I’ll get there someday. Claire and I are talking about assembling a tour group, maybe in a year or so. But more about that later...

When I do get to the Holy Land, I expect to encounter something nearly every other spiritual pilgrim has discovered, at some point on that journey, walking where Jesus walked.

I’m referring to: the tourist trap. The Holy Land is said to be full of them. Fleecing tourists of their hard-earned shekels is a timeless tradition in the Lands of the Bible.

Mark Twain wrote about it in his book, *The Innocents Abroad*, more than a century ago. It was after *he* took a trip to the Holy Land. Twain was led to comment on what a strange thing it was that so many significant events in the Bible seemed to have happened in grottoes: carved-out, cave-like depressions in the rock.

Twain was perceptive enough to realize that none of the original *houses* from that era were still around. So, if you wanted to create a tourist trap with a false impression of authenticity, you went out in the middle of the night with a pick

and shovel and made yourself a grotto. Then, you could claim that one Bible story or another had taken place there.

It was a case of “Washington slept here” long before there was a General Washington!

\*\*\*\*\*

The tradition continues. One of the newer tourist traps in modern-day Palestine, I’m told, is a cable car of the sort you’d find at a ski resort. It carries thousands of tourists a day from the ancient city of Jericho, halfway up the side of a mountain to a Greek Orthodox monastery. One lone monk lives in that monastery today. Thanks to the cable car, he’s got lots of new friends, though.

They say the view’s pretty good from up there, but that’s not why the tourists come. There are three restaurants now, and a luxury hotel, and a whole lot of souvenir shops: but that’s not what brings the people there. The tourists come because the monastery’s called the Monastery of the Temptation. I am not making this up.

It’s said to be built on the very spot where Jesus was tempted by the devil. You can neither prove nor disprove that claim, because Jesus himself was the only witness. (And, by the way, none of the biblical accounts say anything about the Transfiguration taking place on a mountain; they just say he went “into the

wilderness.”) It was in the wilderness that the devil challenged the Lord to turn stones into bread, to demonstrate what a first-rate messiah he was.

Wherever it happened that Jesus was actually tempted — on that mountainside or some other place — there’s one thing for certain: he didn’t ride a cable car to get there. No, he traveled the old-fashioned way: on foot, along a dusty trail.

After making that trek, Jesus had to be pretty tired from all that walking. By the time the devil finally showed up, he was hungry, too: but that’s because he’d been fasting — for forty days and forty nights, the Bible tells us.

The number 40 is code, in the Bible, for “a very long time.” It calls to mind the 40 days of rain in the story of Noah’s flood. Also, the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness.

Whatever the case, the devil waited a very long time before tempting Jesus. He wanted to make sure all that hunger had softened him up for the offers he felt certain were too good to refuse.

\*\*\*\*\*

Those deals were three in number. The devil challenges Jesus to transform stones into bread. Then, he offers Jesus a job: King of the World, essentially. Finally, he tries to talk him into climbing up to the pinnacle of the Temple and jumping off.

You could describe the three temptations as Unlimited Abundance, Unlimited Power and Unlimited Security. Jesus turns him down on all three.

The temptations we read about, as Luke describes them, sound a little strange to our ears. But when you recast them in those terms — abundance, power and security — they're familiar enough, I expect: to all of us.

\*\*\*\*\*

First, there's this matter of turning stones into bread. I'm not suggesting you or I have ever attempted such a parlor trick, but there have surely been times when we've wished most earnestly for unlimited abundance: being rich beyond our wildest dreams.

That's what turning stones into bread really is. Out in the wilderness of the Middle East, there's one thing that's more plentiful than anything else: stones. As common as they are, all those stones are pretty useless. But what if you could turn them into something valuable: like loaves of bread?

If you could magically turn stones into bread, you'd have it made. You could open up a nationwide bread-distribution business. The cost of production would be exactly zero. With such low costs, you could corner the market. You could put Pepperidge Farm, Arnold and Wonder Bread out of business! All's fair in love and baked goods: you'd be wealthy beyond your wildest dreams.

Unlimited Abundance! Sounds pretty sweet, doesn't it?

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, on to temptation number two. The devil throws his arm around Jesus and soars with him up into the skies. In an instant he shows him “all the kingdoms of the world.” If that were happening today, he’d take him on a lightning tour of all the major cities: New York, London, Paris, Beijing, Tokyo, Sydney — on and on. “All these great cities of the world,” the devil would say, “belong to me. But no longer. Because I’m giving them all to you!”

There’s got to be a catch. The offer sounds too good to be true!

But it *is* true. And there’s really not a catch. The devil’s not trying to pull some bait-and-switch. He owns every last one of those cities: every block, lot and fire hydrant. He really *wants* Jesus to have them all, to govern them, to use his benevolent power to reign over them forever!

Why is that, do you suppose? Why would the devil give up such prized possessions to his sworn enemy, demanding nothing by way of payment?

The devil’s willing to give them all up for one reason. He knows that, if Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth is suddenly elevated to King of the World, he’s going to be so busy being king he won’t be able to accomplish his mission. He won’t be able to complete the one task God sent him into the world to do.

He won’t be able to go to the cross. He won’t be able to die there for the sin of the human race. Nor, from the tomb, will he be raised from the dead, that we all

may have hope of eternal life. With unlimited human power at his disposal, Jesus will be so busy making the world a better place, he'll never unlock the gates of heaven.

Let me tell you a little story from one of my favorite books, *The Lord of the Rings*. There's a time in that fantasy novel when Frodo, the hobbit — whose job it is to carry the magical ring to a certain volcano and throw it inside, to destroy it — is meeting with the Elvish Queen, Galadriel. Now, Galadriel is good. She's also beautiful and powerful. Frodo's despairing of his mission. He's unsure he's got what it takes to bear the ring. He offers it to Galadriel — figuring she's so much better-qualified than he to do that hard thing.

Galadriel is truly horrified. She refuses the offer. She does think about it for a minute. She says to Frodo he doesn't know what he's asking: **“In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!”**<sup>1</sup>

In that moment, Galadriel seems to transform, before the hobbit's very eyes, from the beautiful, golden-haired woman in her flowing white robe into a

---

<sup>1</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 381.

screaming Valkyrie. Frodo begins to understand what transformation unlimited power could bring, even to one so good as she.

Frodo's qualification for bearing the ring is not wisdom, nor cunning, nor power, but the fact that, more than most people, he is contented. That means the temptation to power has no hold on him. In our biblical story, the same was true of Jesus.

\*\*\*\*\*

Temptation number three is throwing yourself off the Empire State Building. Well, not exactly. For Luke, it's the pinnacle of the Temple.

Now, that may not sound to you like the most alluring fantasy — especially if you're afraid of heights, as most people are. But you have to hear the whole thing. The devil says to Jesus, "Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple, and I promise you the angels will swoop in and catch you."

It's a superhero fantasy. The devil's offering Jesus the opportunity to play Superman: to go soaring through the air, defying gravity: then, arriving safely on the ground, to the acclamation of a cheering crowd. Sure, the fame and glory are part of it, but the payoff, at its most basic level, is Unlimited Security. As long as the angels are there to catch you, you can jump off all the skyscrapers you want.

My friends, we are living in a time when security is becoming our national obsession. One of the most important — and powerful — government agencies is



the Department of Homeland Security. They've got a huge budget — some of it public, some of it top-secret: and growing bigger all the time. Ever since the 9/11 attacks, a large number of Americans will tell you security is one of their biggest worries. They wake up in the morning fretting over worst-case scenarios that could ambush them or their loved ones — and, they go to bed with those anxieties scarcely diminished.

But what if someone came along and promised us Unlimited Security? Nobody would have to worry about anything, ever again. We'd all be perfectly safe.

Yes, there's something tempting about life without limits. With all the rain today, surely there are some rivers and creeks that have overflowed their banks. Now that may seem, in a certain way of looking at it, to be a good thing — there's no shortage of water, after all! — but we all know what damage floodwaters can cause. The simple truth is: a river needs two banks in order to be a river. And we need some limits in order to live a life worth living.

\*\*\*\*\*

There's really no chance Jesus would ever give in to the devil's temptations. That's because Unlimited Virtue is *his* stock in trade. He's the one human ever to walk this earth who was utterly incorruptible, utterly invulnerable to the wiles of

the tempter. He is “one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin,” it says in Hebrews 4:15.

That means we can trust him. We can trust him, body and soul. When we give our lives to him, when we pledge to follow him — or, when we renew that very pledge made, long ago — he offers to us all the abundance, power and security we need.

These gifts are not unlimited, but we don’t need them to be. Not here, on this earth. They’re unlimited in heaven, and that’s enough.

What you and I most need, here and now, is *him*. So, turn to him this Lent. Turn to him and say, “I’m with you: and I know you’re with me. Together we can overcome any temptation, persevere through any trial, triumph over whatever challenges life may bring.

Let us pray:

**Lord Jesus,  
in those places of desolation we sometimes encounter,  
when we fear our spiritual provisions have run out,  
give us the courage we need to stand fast,  
trusting you to be our guide in all things. Amen.**