

The Hour of Triumph

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 4:1-13

Delivered on March 10, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

As we meet Jesus today, he is still wet from his baptism as he goes in the wilderness to prepare for his ministry—his three year ministry which leads to the cross and the salvation of the world. And to prepare for this ministry both mentally and spiritually, Jesus fasts for forty days. At the end of these forty days, the devil comes to him. The Lord is famished, our scripture says, so the devil tempts him with some nearby stones and says “Command these stones to become bread. (Make these stones into fresh baked bread).” But Jesus says “No.” He quotes the book Deuteronomy, saying “It is written ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

So next, the devil takes him to a high place and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, saying “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 simply bow down and worship me, it will all be yours.” But Jesus again refuses, and again quotes scripture, saying “It is written ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

Then finally, the devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple and says “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, and then the devil himself quotes scripture as he says “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.’”

But a third time, Jesus refuses, this time quoting scripture to counter the devil’s use of scripture as he says “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

So we have here the story of Jesus’ temptation, or at least the story of Jesus’ temptation as Luke tells it. Matthew tells the same story, but he gives the order of the three temptations

differently. And Mark also tells this story, but Mark doesn't many give many details at all. But even when we hear this story in all its excruciating detail, I find it interesting that there is never any reference to how the Lord feels. It is as if the story was told on an episode of that old police show Dragnet. It is just the facts, and nothing more. And so, when we hear this story from the gospel of Luke for example, we hear nothing about how good the thought of turning stone into fresh baked loaves of bread must have sounded after being hungry for forty days.

And when we hear this story, we hear nothing about how the Lord felt when the devil said to him all these kingdoms of the world will be yours if you just bow down and worship me. Jesus was about to begin a ministry where he knew he would be rejected and even crucified and it would be hard, and here was an easy way to complete his mission by being known as the ruler of all creation, just by bowing down to Satan. He wasn't being asked to kill anybody or harm anybody, just bow down to the devil. How strong his desire must have been to say yes.

And when we hear this story, we hear nothing about how confused the Lord must have been as the devil quoted scripture to him in order to convince him to throw himself off the temple. When you go hungry for a long period of time, when your body is weak, your mind can easily get confused, and disoriented. What teacher who has ever taught a lesson to hungry children doesn't know that children who are hungry cannot learn because they cannot think, and so how hard it must have been for Jesus to fight the confusion of someone quoting scripture to him, when his body was so hungry.

We don't hear about any of these things in this story, but they are all contained in this one passage of scripture in which it says he was tempted by the devil. That word tempted means that we are allowed to make inferences about how delicious that bread must have sounded,

that word tempted means we are allowed to make inferences about how confusing the devil's logic must have been, that word tempted means we are allowed to make inferences about how nice an easy ministry must have sounded. It is all contained in that one word, tempted, because there is no such thing as easy temptation. If you want to say something was easy you say I thought about it, or I considered it, but you wouldn't say I was tempted. There is no such thing as temptation that is easy to resist, temptation always takes us to the brink.

You may think that we have ourselves an odd place to put the Lord's temptation story. Why is Jesus being tempted at the beginning of his ministry, after all? He has not as yet faced any hardship. As of now no one has laughed at him yet or mocked him. He has not been rejected by anybody yet. He is a whole three years away from the cross. If I were trying to tempt someone, it seems like there would be better opportunities to tempt them, because as of yet Jesus has not gone through anything which makes him say "How much more of this can I take?" So why is he tempted now of all times? But you may know the answer to that if you think about it. Because it seems like there are always two times in which you face the greatest temptation to walk away from a decision. One time is at the beginning of the decision, and the other time is at the end. If you take a job you're not sure about, you might be tempted to say no at the moment when they call you up and ask you if you accept it, and then you might be tempted to say no at the moment when you are about to walk through the door and into your new office. Of every bride or bridegroom I've ever known, if ever they got cold feet and were tempted to walk away from their wedding, the first time was the day when the engagement ring came out, and the second time was when they were standing at the altar just moments away from hearing those words "I now pronounce you husband and wife". And so it is not

surprising that there would really be two times when our Lord was tempted to walk away. One was a time we'll be reading about on a Thursday night this coming April, when the Lord was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion, on that night when he anxiously prayed for the cup of suffering to pass away from him, and the other time was what we read about today, when the Lord was beginning the journey of his ministry and allowing his mind to meditate on all the suffering and hardship and rejection that the next three years would bring.

And that brings us to the reason why I have given this sermon such an odd title as I call it "The Hour of Triumph" even though we seem miles away from any sort of triumph. As of yet, Jesus hasn't preached a single hard word to someone he loved and to someone who loved him. He hasn't yet had a single day where someone has thought about having him crucified let alone put a plan into motion. He hasn't yet had to experience a single exhausting day of ministry where his teachings are misunderstood, or he has to get in an argument with his religious opponents or he has to make his way through a crowd of hundreds of people who are pressing up against him and asking him to heal them in some way. So where's the triumph? What triumph?

But the triumph has happened because in these forty days of fasting as Jesus is tempted by the devil to walk away from it all as surely he envisions all the emotional and physical and even spiritual pain and exhaustion he will go through in the next thousand days, he says no to all the temptation, and he resolves to go through with it. And there is the victory. That is where the empty tomb is in this story even though the empty tomb is still three years away.

And so it is with all of us. This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday that kicked off the forty day season of Lent. I don't know if any of you went to Ash Wednesday services anywhere

around the community where they put ash on your forehead and pronounce you are dust and to dust you shall return. I personally have not been to an Ash Wednesday service in years. But this past Wednesday we began this forty day season of Lent and many of you may have decided in an effort to get closer to God this Lent that you would go through some spiritual discipline. That discipline usually means giving something up, but it can also mean resolving to do something, like spending fifteen minutes in prayer every day for the next forty days. You still have a long way to go to make it through Lent, we are just getting started. But you have already made it through if you have resolved that this is what you're going to do and that you're going to do it no matter how much you want to quit or how hard it gets. Or think back to the day when you were confirmed, when you stood up before this congregation or any congregation and confessed that you accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior and pledged before all these people to live your life as his disciple. As of that time, you hadn't lived a single day as a Christian yet. But you resolved that this is what you would do for the rest of your life no matter how hard it got, and while I don't wish to be morbid, in that decision, in that decision we already saw the end of your life where we lowered you into the grave and said well done, thy good and faithful servant. Or think back to the day when you presented your child to be baptized, you vowed before God that you would teach them the ways of Christ and love them as Christ loves them and understand them as Christ understands them years before they ever talked back or tried your patience, or expressed values that weren't your values, or morals that weren't your morals. But you resolved that this is what you would do when they were still cute and cuddly, and in that decision you already kept your vow.

None of these things are over yet. Resolving is not the same as doing. I can't just say I resolve to do something without any intention of doing it, and expect all of you to stand up and cheer. But a sincere resolution is still a triumph, and that is what we celebrate today. We celebrate our Lord's victory over sin and death, even before he took the first step on a thousand mile journey.