

Sermon 01-17-10
Deuteronomy 10:12-21
Luke 4:1-13
The Trials of Ministry

How many of you have made a new years resolution? It's nothing to be embarrassed about nor am I going to poke fun at it, I was just curious. You see one of my colleagues in ministry, with whom I serve on a subcommittee, made a new years resolution to exercise more and eat properly. As a group, we agreed to keep this person to their resolution by checking in on him from time to time. While I've never been a fan of making resolutions, I have no problem working with others to see them come to fruition. But they are interesting to me. I've noticed that it takes the slightest push to knock someone off course; the slightest temptation or deviation that can throw the whole resolution out of whack.

The obvious and popular resolution is weight loss and exercise. Just waiting in line at the checkout counter in the grocery store, you can pick up on helpful tidbits for reaching your resolution goals. It seems as if every magazine has an article about fulfilling a new years resolution, tips for losing weight and staying on an exercise regimen. More to the point, it seems that every article cautions against the temptations that will often present themselves. Avoid sweets; don't be tempted by chocolates, drinks, and fatty foods. Don't let others tempt you along the way. While I don't want to discount the advice, I wonder if the use of the word temptation is the best possible choice, for if nothing else, it clouds our understanding of temptation as it is found in scripture.

When we approach the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, we shouldn't think of it as if Jesus were being tempted by a piece of cake or a piece of candy. Those are frivolous things that don't call something into violation. Those things aren't "real" temptations. What Jesus faces are temptations, trials whose sole purpose is to entice Jesus into violating who

he is as the Son of God. For him, facing temptation is more than facing something that brings with it a slap on the wrist; rather the temptation and trial that Jesus faces in the early stages of his ministry involves abandoning God's mission and ministry, abandoning faithfulness in God in exchange for faithfulness in his own abilities.

Following his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed for forty days. As Jesus was baptized for ministry in the Jordan River, now he heads into the wilderness to experience the early trials of ministry. At the end of his forty-day journey, Jesus was famished. He was in a position of vulnerability and it is at this point that we hear of the encounter between Jesus and the devil.

When the devil enters the scene, he comes with a tempting offer. "Hey Jesus, if you're the Son of God, take this stone here and tell it to become a loaf of bread." Quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus defines his role as Son: he is called to a life of faithfulness, a life of faithful obedience to the will of his Father in heaven. There is no room for independent thinking and acting. Since he is the mission of the Father to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit, his ministry is the ministry of God himself within the world. What Jesus shows in his quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3 is the nature of true human living: it is more than meeting physical needs and satisfying hunger. Faithful human living involves total dependence upon God for everything.

Next, the devil takes Jesus and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. He will give them all to Jesus if he will do one simple thing: bow down upon his knees and worship the devil. Again, Jesus quotes from scripture to confront the devil's temptation. Using Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus sets the context for his ministry by emphasizing the need to worship the Lord God alone. In response to the devil's call for idolatry and unfaithfulness,

Jesus counters with his insistence that the life of ministry, the life of faithfulness is marked by the faithful worship of God.

Finally, after learning Jesus' style, the devil takes Jesus up to the highest part of the Temple and says to him, "Throw yourself off of here, since you're the Son of God. Isn't it written in the good book that God will command his angels to protect you and bear you up?" And in response to this last challenge, Jesus quotes again from Deuteronomy to bear witness to the reality of the life of faithfulness: you don't put the Lord your God to the test. In all these moments of temptation and testing, we come to recognize three key aspects of Jesus mission and ministry to the world.

First, Jesus' temptation clarifies and outlines what his ministry will look like as the only-begotten Son of God. His is a ministry of faithfulness to the mission and ministry God the Father has entrusted to him. What we see in each of the three temptations is a call by the devil to lead Jesus to a point of unfaithfulness and disobedience. In response to the devil, we catch a glimpse of the depths of Jesus' unflinching faithfulness to his mission and to his Father. Second, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is a recapitulation of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. "Like Israel, Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. The period of forty days also evokes the period of Israel's testing...Consequently, the three temptations themselves may be seen as corresponding to the temptations of Israel, which involve bread (Exodus 16:15), testing the Lord (Exodus 17:1-7), and idolatry (Exodus 32) (Culpepper, 98)." Finally, Jesus' temptations can be seen as the conflict between God and the powers of sin and death signified in the presence of the devil. The ministry of Jesus is the ministry of defeating sin and death, which comes to a head as Jesus is crucified. In this

way, we can see the temptation of Jesus as a preparation for the types of conflicts he will encounter throughout his ministry as narrated by Luke.

Throughout the last few weeks we've been looking at different aspects of ministry. First, we began by looking at the reality of God's ministry within this church and within this community. Last week, we spent time looking at the fact that we are baptized for ministry and sent out into the world. But now we turn our attention to the trials we surely face in the midst of ministry and discipleship. There is no such thing as a problem free, utopian life where nothing hampers or hinders us. That's clear enough in the ministry of Jesus. In the midst of this scene narrated by Luke we catch a glimpse of the work of God in the world; rather than standing outside of the muck and grime of creation, God enters into it in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, confronting the work of evil and sin within the world. Peeling back the surface of Luke's text we come to recognize that there are trials in the midst of ministry; yet the good news is that the "one who is tempted in the wilderness by the devil is also the crucified and resurrected one, in whom God's new life is made available to those who cannot, by their own resources, withstand temptation. The one who is tempted in the wilderness thus strengthens us in our weakness."¹

In the midst of our lives, there are many real temptations that assail us. Quite often, they are temptations that mask themselves as truth-telling. For instance, within our gospel passage this morning each of the temptations offered by the devil involved a lie masked with half-truth in one way or another. Jesus could have commanded the stone to become bread, he could have worshipped the devil, he could have thrown himself off of the pinnacle of the temple, and yet to do so would have been a violation of who he is as the Son of God;

¹ Kimberly Van Driel, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol. 2* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 47.

in complying with the devil's lies, Jesus would not have been faithful. That's the real challenge to us when we are faced with temptation and trials: will we remain faithful or will we cave under the pressure and fall into disobedience and idolatry?

In the midst of our day-to-day lives, in the midst of our discipleship, we will face challenges to our faith and periods of trial. It's inevitable. These challenges might be found in the internet, or on television, or some other media outlet. The trials and temptations may arise through the decisions we make and the people we surround ourselves with. These temptations might be the gentle lull of idolatry that comes from internet addictions or the worship of television. It might come from friends or family who call us to forsake our faith or call us to become utterly reliable upon our own efforts. In every case, the task for us is not to look at a situation and ask, "what would Jesus do?" That becomes a moment of unfaithfulness in the midst of temptation because it calls us to rely upon our own abilities and our own efforts rather than find strength in the Lord. Rather, we must wholly focus ourselves upon the faithful obedience of Jesus Christ, who is faithful, faithful to us and faithful to God on our behalf so that we might find our strength in him.

It's all too easy to be tempted into self-reliance and a host of other unfaithful acts. So we must look again and again to our Lord and savior, who is faithful to us, who has bound our lives to his life, and will strengthen us in the midst of the temptations we face. Under his power and compulsion, we must resist the urge to rely upon our own efforts and our own steam, for in the end, that way leads us to forsake our faith. When we fail to recognize our utter dependence on God for everything we tread the road of the devil and his enticements. In this way, we come to know that we can weather the trials of ministry and discipleship, the trials of every-day living. The ways of evil and sin have no power over us,

for in Jesus Christ we find the victory over them. In Christ we know the defeat of the devils power and the new life that is empowered by his Holy Spirit. By his strength, not our own, we can confront the temptations that assail us, for just as surely as Jesus defeated those powers within his own life, he is still about the ministry of confronting those powers here and now, all the while calling us to faithfully abide in his faithfulness toward us. Praise, glory and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.