

Sunday March 5th, 2017

Lent I

PRAYER: Faithful One of the Ages, you are our creator. In the beginning you formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Ever since, we have rebelled against you, thinking we knew better what was good and evil; and we have hidden from you, learning that we did not know at all. But we always come back, Lord. We always come back. Embrace us, dear God, as we return home.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: O God, we find when confronted by temptations, we are easily overcome. They allure us with promises we find hard to resist. We harbour fantasies of how our lives might have been. Our dreams become pervasive, hiding the truth of your love. Gracious God, have mercy upon us; enable us to discern deception when it appears. Enlighten us to your genuine renewal in Christ.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: “It is fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering...Because Christ himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” Therein lays our assurance that Christ intercedes on our behalf. Let us live as those made righteous in him!

STEWARDSHIP: God in his compassion, ministers to us in the wilderness. When barren waste lands surround us, God hears our prayers of petition. In times of want, he eases our plight with mercy. In times of plenty all that we have comes from his grace. In bringing our gifts to God, we are returning what is already his. May God use these tithes and offerings to bring all people into the Promised Land.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, we stand here before you striped of all pretense and pride. If we dare boast, it is because of your grace. What goodness we have, you have bestowed upon us. You created us and gave us our name. As a fine potter works the clay, so you have fashioned us. You shape us and mold us to fit your design. Out of the depths we cry unto you, our Maker; hear our voice and be attentive to our pleas.

When we are cast into the wilderness and alone with ourselves, keep us from temptation beyond what we can endure. As in the garden you provided all that man and woman needed, so now let us rely on your goodness to protect us from harm. We are tempted to turn your blessing into means to gratify ourselves. Money, status, and power seduce us. Teach us the mind of Christ, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant. And when others treat us with disdain and their taunts wound us and weaken our resolve, keep us firm in our confession that is your favour we seek. When success comes our way, and friends speak well of us, help us to receive these gifts as the ministry of your angels, and praise your name without ceasing.

Bring us back from times alone better equipped to serve the needs of others. In Jesus Christ the free gift of your righteousness has come to us. Use us in turn to set upright those lives that are askew. Empower us to bring comfort to those who mourn, wholeness to those who are sick, the bread of life to the hungry, and the cup of salvation to the oppressed. Help us to give from the abundance of the blessings you bestow, so that others may abound in your promise of new life.

BENEDICTION: Do not live by bread alone, but by the will of God. May God give the angels charge over you; may their hands bear you up and keep you from falling. Amen.

Sunday March 5th, 2017

Lent I

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

“The Devil Made me Do It.”

Psychologist Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family fame, was driving one day when he encountered a sign posted on the front lawn of a convent in Southern California. The sign read, “Absolutely No Trespassing-Violators will be prosecuted to the Full Extent of the Law.” Then the sign, I kid you not, was signed “The Sisters of Mercy.” (1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking, p. 224) Is it just me, or is there something a bit off with that sign?

No one likes being prosecuted, even when we know we are guilty. Perhaps you are familiar with the story of a state governor touring a correctional facility in his state, and as he passed by each cell the incarcerated men stood at the bars pleading their innocence knowing the governor could pardon them. The cacophony of voices was almost deafening, until he came to the very last cell and the man incarcerated there remained silently sitting on his bunk.

The governor stopped and spoke to the man. “Why do you not also stand at the bars and plead your innocence?” The man replied, “I am not innocent. I deserve to be here. I committed the crime and am guilty.” With that, the governor turned to the prison warden and said, “Release this man at once. We cannot have this guilty man tainting all these innocent men.”

Even from a very early age we get especially upset, when we are being blamed or prosecuted for something we either know we did not do, or at least think we did not do. We learn early on that we should be innocent until proven guilty. The whole concept of adversarial law is fascinating to us. How else do we explain the proliferation of legal dramas on television? In fact, maybe they are running out of new ideas, because a new show called Bull, is about a jury consultant.

Lawyers frighten a great number of us, and we go to great lengths to avoid interacting with one. How many things have we done as individuals, or as a church even, in the expressed hope we avoid being sued? We don't like lawyers, until we need one. I ran across a story about a defense lawyer conferring with his client and he began by stating that he had good news and bad news. “The bad news is your blood was found all over the crime scene and clearly you're guilty.”

“What's the good news?” the accused asked. “The lawyer replied, “The good news is that the lab work also said your cholesterol is only 130.” Lawyers, as a profession, have been around a very long time. One of the things from scripture that always surprises people is that the Devil is often portrayed as a lawyer (no jokes please), or more accurately a prosecutor. In fact, many scholars believe that that was the Devil's original reason for existence.

A good example of this is recorded in the book of Job, where the Devil comes to God the judge, and seeks freedom to test, or prosecute Job. The goal is to find out if Job's faith is truly authentic. The existence of God is not being challenged here, but rather does Job only believe God is good because of the “hedge of protection” planted around him. The struggle throughout the book of Job, comes from Job and his friends trying to understand why these bad things are happening to Job. The reader knows of the Devil's work, but Job is unaware, and is never told of the Devil prosecuting him.

Sunday March 5th, 2017

Lent I

The illustration of being in a court room is used throughout scripture, with one of the more comforting ideas presented to us is that the Holy Spirit is our “Advocate” or defense attorney. This adversarial testing is at the heart of the temptation story before us today. It is a critical story because three of the four gospels record it, in almost identical form. This should be enough evidence for us to sit up and take notice.

We know from the scriptures that immediately after Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit led him out into the wilderness. The wilderness of Judea is a windswept place of rocks, sand, and stunted shrubbery. Rarely did anyone voluntarily go out into the wilderness. Jesus was not prosecuted immediately, but we read he fasted for forty days and forty nights and surprise, surprise, afterwards he was hungry.

The passage, I should point out, does not say Jesus went without water. No human can go that long without water. The number forty, you may have surmised, is a significant number in scripture. It was forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, and Elijah wandered for forty days in the wilderness. Forty represents testing, forging, and preparing for something great. Suffice it to say, Jesus was at his lowest level physically, and is ripe for the Devil’s prosecution.

The temptations, or tests described here, are designed to cut deep, and are specifically tailored to Jesus. The first is designed to see if Jesus’ faith is greater than his immediate physical needs. In the wilderness there were rocks rounded by wind and sand which resembled loaves of bread. The Devil tempted, or tested him, by saying that if he truly was the Son of God, he could command the stones to become bread. A cruel test considering how hungry he was.

Jesus quotes scripture as a response. “One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” The second test is designed to see if Jesus truly trusts God at his word. The devil takes Jesus to the very pinnacle of the temple and suggests Jesus throw himself down to test God’s promise in the bible that says that he will not even stub his toe. Why not test that? But Jesus responds from scripture itself and replied, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

And finally, the third test was to see who Jesus truly worshipped and followed. In other words, where is his ego in all of this? The Devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers to give them to Jesus if he simply would fall down and worship the devil. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” Notice that each time Jesus uses scripture to respond to the test. God’s word carries the day in this prosecution.

When these three tests failed to get Jesus to compromise his faith, the bible says that the devil left him, and in some of the other gospel records we read he left until a more opportune time. Those words “more opportune time” are quite unsettling. Makes one wonder what the opportune time is in our lives. Then, and only then, did the angels come and wait on him. In other words, serve him some food. Then, and this is very important, only after the testing, the prosecuting, does Jesus begin his ministry.

There are so many lessons that come from this passage, one may struggle to see it all, but the one lesson that some may take away from this passage is erroneous. It’s downright wrong.

Sunday March 5th, 2017

Lent I

It would be easy to think having read this passage, that Jesus had somehow in the wilderness earned the right to represent God, that he had somehow passed an initiation. Albeit, we might be tempted to think that the test was a bit rigged.

I mean Jesus is Jesus. He is the perfect Son of God. But we do the passage a disservice, and belittle Jesus' humanity, by ever thinking the temptations were not real, or the prosecution was somehow rigged. Just as with Job, the potential for Jesus to give in to the temptations was very real. The tests were cunning, and specifically designed for Jesus. Remember he was hungry. Only Christ's faith, and his knowledge of scripture, carried him through it.

This drama among the rocks and sand was not an initiation, and it certainly wasn't about earning God's love and favour. God has never once asked us to earn his love, even when we were lost to him. Even when the prosecutor, the Devil, finds fault with us (which is a certainty); God still loves us. Whether God loved Jesus is never up for debate, or questioned in this temptation story, nor ever throughout the gospels. Now, this is so important for everyone to hear and understand.

When does the temptation story occur? In Matthew's account, it happens almost at the beginning after the nativity stories. Consider the timing for one moment. Jesus, has yet in Matthew's account, to teach anything at all, really. He has yet to: heal anyone, call a disciple, or raise anyone from the dead. Certainly the crucifixion and resurrection has yet to occur. This is still about three years away. All the stuff we love about what Jesus says and does, hasn't happened yet.

So, what defines or identifies him as the Son of God? If it isn't the things he does or says, or even that he resisted the Devil's temptation; where does his identity come from. Did he just wake up one day and think, "Gee, I am the Messiah!" I am sure he had many signs of it growing up. Mary and Joseph would have told him the stories of his birth, but still there needs to be confirmation. Why go into the wilderness if you are not at all sure?

Well, I did say Jesus went into the wilderness with almost nothing being recorded as happening before hand, but there was something that happened. Verse 1 reads, "Then Jesus was led..." Then? That means something happened first. What was it? It was Jesus' baptism, but more importantly, we are told that a dove descended from heaven and landed on Jesus, and a voice (surely it was God) said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

God's beloved. Jesus was God's beloved before he did anything at all. God loved Jesus before he went into the wilderness. God's love for Jesus was without reservation or qualification. God would still love Jesus no matter what happened with the Devil. And if you do not believe that, we are all without hope.

This unconditional love is not without precedence in our lives. Remember the first time you held your new born son or daughter or grandchild. You held that little life in your arms, and you loved them. No one told you, you had to love them. That little baby has done absolutely nothing to earn your love. Nothing. He or she just is. Wisely, you know that going forward there are going to be challenges. Life lessons to learn, temptations to overcome, milestones to achieve, but all along what never changes? Your love. At least in an ideal world that's true.

Sunday March 5th, 2017

Lent I

Sadly for some children, their parents' own fragile egos demand that the child earns their love, but for most of us the love is unconditional. The good news is that even if your own parents messed up the unconditional love thing, God hasn't. Conditional love I argue isn't really love at all. Let me posit that if someone threatens to take away their love from you, if you do not do something, regardless of who they are; then there was likely no love present to begin with.

In God's world, love is not a commodity to be earned or lost. You can give as much as you want and there is always more to give. John writes that "God is love". It is part of his nature. "We love because he first loved us". The implications for you and I are staggering. The first part of the good news is that scripture tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that we are never tested beyond our ability to cope.

Paul writes, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may endure it." Furthermore, we are told in Hebrews 4:15-16, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Having therefore failed to successfully prosecute Jesus. To find him guilty of anything. The Devil then turns his attention to a softer target. A target he knows is vulnerable to charges, and lacking in any credible defense. That target is you and I. We know we are guilty, and no amount of legal finagling is going to dispose of that stain on us. But just like in Canadian civil law, in God's courtroom there are precedents.

In Canada, and in many western nations, legal decisions are often argued based on what previous courts said about similar cases in the past. It's called precedence. "Roe vs. Wade" for example, has influenced abortion law and court challenges for decades in the states. In God's courtroom, the devil stands as the prosecutor, ready, and very eager to lay out our transgressions in detail and *ad nauseam*.

However, just as the Devil is getting warmed up, our defense attorney-I did mention earlier we had one, namely the Holy Spirit-stands up and makes an objection. We have Jesus as our High Priest. In him our transgressions are wiped out. The Devil's case against us is without merit. Time and time again, for each one of us, this precedence is cited. Jesus was prosecuted as we are, and he was found blameless. Now he pleads for us based on his righteousness.

The case was settled before we even walked in. The Devil's prosecution is made mute. The judge, or in this example God, looks with his loving gaze upon us, and declares us not guilty. Not because of anything we have done, but because of what Jesus has done. And just like with Jesus, God's love for us, even before we enter that courtroom, is never in doubt. Our unrighteousness, our sin, our guilt; has all been wiped away by Jesus.

No matter how rough life gets, we are never without hope. As Hebrews states, "We can approach the throne of grace with boldness." We can stand before the judge and claim Jesus.

Sunday March 5th, 2017

Lent I

Tony Campolo writes of an unconfirmed story from the life of the world famous chess champion Bobby Fisher, who went with a friend to see the Ingmar Bergman film *The Seventh Seal*. The plot of this story revolved around a medieval knight who engages in a chess match with death.

Throughout the film each character makes chess moves, arriving at the climax of the movie where the Prince of Darkness makes a move, and with great finality, utters the word “checkmate!” With that the movie is over. According to the story Fisher was very agitated and with a puzzled look turned to his friend and exclaimed, “Why is he giving up? The king has one more move! The king has one magnificent move left that can turn the tide and win the game.” (Stories that Feed Your Soul, p.118)

The king has one more move! There is always hope for us. There is love in abundance from the throne of grace. The Devil may have made you do it, but Jesus has finished it, once and for all. So come to God with boldness. Set your fear aside because of what Jesus has done for us, we are innocent.