

North Kildonan United Church

6th March 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Temptation”

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Romans 10: 8b-13

Luke 4: 1-13

Gracious God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Happy Lent! Perhaps not the sort of greeting one should extend on the beginning of such a solemn season of sacrifice and contemplation. Or is it precisely the right greeting?

In the introductory remarks with which began today's service, I said, in part: "*In the name of Christ, therefore, I invite you to observe this holy season of Lent, by prayer, self-denial and charitable giving; by self-examination and repentance; and by reading and meditating on God's word.*" These words come to us from the English Methodist Church, a denomination with whom we have much in common.

In Voices United we find an even stronger call to repent.

- 1 *Sunday's palms are Wednesday's ashes
 as another Lent begins;
 thus we kneel before our Maker
 in contrition for our sins.
 We have marred baptismal pledges,
 in rebellion gone astray;
 now, returning, seek forgiveness;
 grant us pardon, God, this day!*
- 2 *We have failed to love our neighbours,
 their offences to forgive,
 have not listened to their troubles,
 nor have cared just how they live;
 we are jealous, proud, impatient,
 loving overmuch our things;
 may the yielding of our failings be our Lenten offering.*
- 3 *We are hasty to judge others,
 blind to proof of human need;
 and our lack of understanding
 demonstrates our inner greed;
 we have wasted earth's resources;
 want and suffering we've ignored;
 come and cleanse us, then restore us;
 make new hearts within us, Lord!*

It's interesting to note that in our reading from Luke, there is actually no reference to repentance, not that repentance isn't important. The focus for Luke is on the three temptations Jesus faced during his forty days fasting in the wilderness.

Imagine, if you will, Jesus in the wilderness. Chances are that Jesus was all alone, not having extended conversations with an in-person devil. As Tom Wright says: *"the devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense. God can't want his beloved son to be famished with hunger, can he? If God wants Jesus to become sovereign over the world (that, after all, is what Gabriel had told Mary), then why not go for it in one easy stride? If Jesus is Israel's Messiah, why not prove it by spectacular displays of power?"*

So how does Jesus respond to these temptations, respond to the devil messing with his mind? Jesus doesn't debate with the voice, doesn't head down that path of justifying then possibly reconsidering his position. Instead, Jesus quotes scripture, specifically the Book of Deuteronomy. Anyone who has dealt with temptation, and actually that includes all of us, knows how easily we can convince ourselves to abandon our willpower for "just this one time". You don't need me to catalogue whatever it is that you find tempting yet feel you shouldn't have or shouldn't do or shouldn't buy, or whatever you might be wrestling with.

To understand these temptations, we should situate them in Luke's gospel. The first three chapters speak of the promise of the birth of Jesus, then his actual birth, then when he was twelve his encounter with the teachers in the temple, then at age thirty his baptism by John. In the words of Luke, Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.

At his baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and that same Spirit led him from the baptismal water of the river Jordan into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days.

Jesus would be very vulnerable at this point, and the devil, the voice within him, was trying to test his resolve. Let's understand these temptations as tests, tests that showed that Jesus was ready for all the trials ahead. Tests that also show his solidarity with humanity, because we have in our own ways faced and failed tests such as these.

So if we think of the first test, the temptation for Jesus to transform a stone into bread, as something we wouldn't hesitate to do if we were hungry and had the power to achieve such a feat, if we think of his refusal, it shows us the self-control he had over his own body.

The second test is connected to his baptism, when the voice from heaven declared that Jesus was God's son. The son whom God was calling to be Messiah, King of Israel and the world, but there is a right way and a wrong way to achieve this.

The wrong way was this. All Jesus had to do was allow the devil to hand over to him the kingdoms of this world, just in exchange for allowing the devil to be worshipped by Jesus. Basically the devil would be the ultimate king and Jesus a puppet. Jesus

resisted the temptation of an instant satisfaction of his ambition and declared that only the Lord your God is worthy of worship and God is the one to serve.

The third test was to suggest the staging of a cheap stunt which would amaze the people who saw it. Just throw yourself off the top of the temple, allow the angels to gently bring you down to earth and everyone will be astounded by your power. The devil quotes Psalm 91 to support his case.

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy that warns "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*". Jesus will draw people to himself because of his teachings and his healings, not by cheap theatrics.

All three tests, all three temptations, were based on shortcuts, on the avoidance of discomfort or hard work or patience.

Martyn Percy writes: "*Put simply, the three traditional Lenten temptations of Jesus are really only one: why not take a short cut? Well, three reasons occur, that help us through the journey of Lent.*

First, short cuts don't usually work-they cheat the journey of faith. In trying to shorten the long and winding road of discipleship, we may miss out on God's company and wisdom.

Second, God's work is slow; the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. Discipleship and holiness are built slowly, with years of patience, practice and learning. Lent is about this. Lent can't be done in ten days or twenty minutes; it is forty days. Short cuts can devalue our discipleship.

Third, short cuts rob other people of the chance to respond and grow. It may well be possible to grow a church or a ministry very quickly. The results can be spectacular. But now try and sustain it. Not so easy. There is no substitute for hard work. That's why miracle diets don't really work. So don't try a thirty-day wonder; slowly change the way you eat; effort and will are better than quick-fix cures.

Finally, he writes: "*So in one way, Lent is all about slowing down, and leaving quick-fix solutions behind. It is about patiently deepening our relationship with God, and doing so in a thorough and methodical way. The aim is not to achieve instant success, but steady and deep growth. Fruit that lasts comes from hard graft. Jesus, in his Lent, turns his back on instant glory, instant results and an easy, happy ending. He will be glorified; he will get results; there will be a resurrection. But it has to be in God's time, not ours.*"

So we begin our way through Lent, led by the One who was tempted yet did not sin, the One we know and love as our Lord Jesus Christ.

Percy Dearmer, an English Anglican minister of the early part of the 20th century, wrote a marvellous hymn entitled **Now Quit Your Care**, at 109 in Voices United. I think you will find it quite a contrast to the hymn I quoted earlier. Let's end with a few verses of it:

1 *Now quit your care and anxious fear and worry;
for schemes are vain and fretting brings no gain.
Lent calls to prayer, to trust and dedication;
God brings new beauty nigh;
reply, reply, reply with love to love most high;
reply, reply, reply with love to love most high.*

2 *To bow the head in sackcloth and in ashes,
or rend the soul, such grief is not Lent's goal;
but to be led to where God's glory flashes,
God's beauty to come near.
Make clear, make clear, make clear where truth and light appear;
make clear, make clear, make clear where truth and light appear.*

May you have a happy and blessed Lent. Amen.