

North Kildonan United Church

13th March 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The Temptations Revisited”

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Philippians 3: 17-4:1

Luke 13: 31-35

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

One of the great gifts available to most people nowadays is YouTube. It's free, which appeals to most Winnipeggers, but more importantly it is a wonderful resource for discovering all kinds of video programming. For instance, before Sunday this service will be placed on YouTube, thus making our experience of worship available to anyone who *wishes* to see it, *whenever* they decide to see it. Of course, YouTube can never replace the full experience of worshipping with others, but as we found during the lockdowns of the past two years, it is such a valuable resource for providing the worship service for those unable to attend in person.

YouTube brings the world into the TV, computer or monitor we might be using. It is not limited to geography, and more importantly, it is not limited to only current events. Sherlock Holmes movies from the 1940s, featuring Basil Rathbone, share listings with a vast array of cooking shows, lectures, news broadcasts and yes, religious broadcasting from great cathedrals and abbeys to neighbourhood congregations such as ours. During the isolation and restrictions of the pandemic, the comprehensive programming on YouTube certainly helped ease those trying days.

One of my favourite preachers on YouTube is the Rev. Dr. Sam Wells. Currently he is the vicar of St Martin in the Fields Church in London, England, but before that he was the Dean of the Chapel of Duke University in the United States.

Duke Chapel, like so many American universities with a religious background and very wealthy donors, is a stunning place of worship. Excellent choir and magnificent organ, beautiful stained-glass windows and carvings, high vaulted ceilings and a sanctuary that easily seats over a thousand people.

It was in that setting that I remember watching one of Dr. Wells' sermons on YouTube.

He began the sermon by talking about a phone call he had received during his years as a parish minister in England. A rather distressed woman had called him up, saying that she thought her house was haunted and could he come and do an exorcism. So, a few days later he visited her, and they talked. Sam told her that through his death and resurrection Jesus had overcome the power of evil and that the way we embody Jesus' victory is through baptism. However, baptism doesn't always give us freedom

from fear. So, he invited her to accompany him to all the rooms of her house, as he prayed for deliverance from fear and sprinkled the waters of baptism. They returned to the living room and sat down again.

He said the woman looked at him with disappointment in her face and she said: *"Is that it? I could have done that!"*

"Is that it?" This story sort of has echoes of last week's gospel account of the three temptations.

It seems to me that people are attracted to spectacle and demonstrations of power and skill. They, we, like a good show – the passion Manitoba fans have for the Jets is but one example of the lengths people will go for entertainment and for the thrill of sport. Or when there is a car accident – how many vehicles slow down while passing so that drivers and passengers can get a good look at what happened.

Nothing like a bit of blood and gore to get people's attention, whether it's on the playing field or hockey rink, or on the roads or at the scene of a violent crime. That which repulses us strangely enough also attracts us – think of the devotion many have for crime shows, as murdered bodies are dissected for clues, or the war documentaries on TV stations and YouTube, showing yet again how cruel and low humans can sink. I rather wonder if the real-life images from Ukraine are dampening the attraction of war and violence shows.

I guess you could say that it's drama, and that drama entertains. And that drama is everywhere; it is a part of our daily living. When we recount something that has happened, something we have witnessed or were involved in, how often do we dramatize the account, embellish the story when telling others, just a bit to get the point across, or to keep the listener listening. We don't want to be boring, so we shape the story with some what ifs, some exclamations such as *"I almost died"* – even if the procedure we are talking about is getting a cavity filled at the dentist's or breaking in a new pair of shoes.

Many also want their religion to be dramatic too. By that I am not talking about the style and the content of worship, because that is a different kind of drama, and the very nature of worship requires a careful element of drama. What I mean is that there are those who want their religious experiences to be dramatic, to be stunning, to be lightning bolts from the sky events or the voice of God speaking directly to them. During the time of the Wesleys, a woman once got a hold of Charles Wesley and complained that she didn't feel anything when she received Holy Communion. *"Woman"*, he replied, *"Communion is not about feeling"*. I believe he also told her that if she wanted to feel something she should go and serve the poor and the needy, then the gospel would come alive to her.

People also often want their religion to be powerful or at least to be seen by others as powerful, and shall we say, successful. For Protestants in particular, the numbers

game is played, where the size of the congregation is a supposed sign that *those* people are on the right track because they have a large attendance. Implicit in that thought is the wondering – *"so why can't we be like that, what should we doing in order to have a full church and such magnificent programming?"* The wondering often stops when it is pointed out that such things cost a lot in money and time and dedication. But still, some Christians will look with envy on those in the mega churches, those self-appointed cathedrals with their diversity of programming for all ages as well as their private school, and the well-furnished and comfortable sanctuaries with padded seats and excellent audio systems and the espresso machine in the lobby. It's all so tempting to compare church life to the values of the society around us.

We might want to recall the temptations Jesus faced as Luke told us in last week's gospel. In last week's sermon I described the three temptations as examples of shortcuts. Here is another way of understanding them.

Jesus' first temptation dealt with his hunger. *"Transform this stone into bread and prove yourself, Jesus"*, the devil tells him. But the ministry of Jesus is for others, not himself, so he will not give into this temptation, hungry though he is.

The second focusses on power. His followers will succumb to the use and misuse of power continually, sometimes for the wrong ends, but Jesus will not. The devil was trying to persuade Jesus to become a military Messiah, the leader of a great crusade perhaps, who through the sword and political manoeuvring would bring in a kingdom – but that kingdom would not be the kingdom of God. The sword and coercion are not the ways of God's kingdom. Jesus' mission is about saving others, not about asserting worldly power. His gospel is love, not fear.

The third temptation, about jumping from the top of the temple and being rescued by angels, is partly about presenting a spectacle – a dramatic act, shall we say, but it is more. If the angels can rescue him at this point, the beginning of his ministry, why can't he just then take a different path, one that avoids service, avoids the cross, and instead leads to fame and riches and living to a ripe old age, comfortable and revered. But that is not the way for Jesus, and he rejects this third temptation. And the devil leaves the scene, for now but not forever.

In various ways, the followers of Jesus fall into the temptations presented here. Whenever we lose our bearings, we the church can abandon the way and the life we are meant to embody and instead go for self-fulfillment, for power, for spectacle, often in some kind of bid to boost attendance or improve our profile in the community or just lord it over others. It is significant to remember that once the wilderness experience was over, Jesus began his ministry in a Nazareth synagogue by quoting Isaiah and in doing so proclaimed what his ministry, and his followers' ministry, is all about: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He*

has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

"Is that it? I could have done that", the woman said to Sam Wells that day. No spectacle, no flashing lights, no eerie noises or weird sounds, no moaning demons the way Hollywood might present it – just the assurance given by a minister of God that Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection, has defeated the power of all that threatens to destroy us. And that same Jesus Christ invites us to play our part in his ministry to the world, a ministry of service, not self-fulfillment; a ministry of mercy and forgiveness, not the exercise of power; a ministry of humble care, not spectacle; a ministry of easing burdens and lifting loads, in a word the ministry of God's love to a hurting world.

May God grant us grace and forgiveness for all those times when we have chosen the wrong way, when we have given into the temptation to be less than what we know we can be, when we forget that we belong to Christ and that only in Christ do we find our true life, our true hope, our true joy.

May God grant us all a holy and blessed season of Lent. Amen.