

“Refined By Fire”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
February 28th, 2016
3rd Sun. in Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 4:1-21

*Why spend money for what isn't food, and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.*

Isaiah 55:2

Let us pray... O God,

In those desert times and places of our lives, we pray that you give us
the spiritual food and drink we need to nourish us, in body, mind, & spirit.

When we come through such times, help us remember how you loved and cared for us
and help strengthen us to accept who you created us to be and to help others do so in turn.

Amen

Today's Gospel lesson is about the temptations of Jesus in the desert,
but also includes his return to preach at his home town synagogue in Nazareth.
These events immediately follow his baptism when the heavens opened up
for the Spirit of God to come down to rest upon him and
for him to hear a voice from Heaven tell him he was loved.
Then the Holy Spirit urged him, pushed him into the wasteland of fear and hunger
and it was *at the end* of those 40 days when he was most vulnerable,
when he was tempted...

I believe there are two baptisms that Christians must go through:

The first is the baptism by water – usually a public event when someone is
adopted into the Christian family of faith.

The second is the baptism of fire – the baptism of life experience
when we discover who we are and what we believe in, through adversity.

Now, the significance of Christian baptism is comparable
to the Jewish rite of circumcision which leaves no doubt about being Jewish –
being Jewish men, that is!

The baptismal rite of Christianity, however, is inclusive of both men & women
to be received as equal members into the Church.

Baptism by water is a kind of marking – like a tattoo, but a design only God can see:
no bloodletting, no scar, no discoloration

Unlike such rites of initiation in other cultures,
the marking of our baptism is that of a nonviolent God of love.

Emerging from the waters, Jesus was greeted with a vision of the Holy Spirit.
but that same Spirit would guide him to confront his worst enemy –
Satan, a word that means 'enemy'.

In this way, Jesus entered a second baptism – the baptism by fire...

Willard, p.2

This is the baptism of experience and choice –

for out of this event comes the guiding vision of one's life, one's identity.

It is like the vision quest of Native American cultures where a child is initiated in order to be received into the community as an adult.

This was accomplished by fasting for at least 3 days and in the delirium of fatigue, receive a vision.

From the imagery of that vision, one receives a new name and out of the ordeal, establishes one's identity.

Jesus' ordeal began with a challenge to his identity when the enemy asks, "If..."

"If you are the Son of God...?" The word, "If..." implies doubt –

Are you who you say you are?.

In the Gospel of Luke version of this story, Satan is not named as the tempter, but is called the devil, or 'diabolos', a Greek word meaning 'divided paths' – neither this way nor that, but 'my way or the highway', oppressive conformity which excludes character and individuality.

Our theologians do a good job these days of demythologizing Christ trying to find the truth about the historical Jesus –

and I agree it is important to unpack the labels we have taken for granted about God.

But I think we also need to demythologize the powers of evil, and break them down in the process to expose their ugly emptiness.

The devil is not our problem anyway – which is for God through Christ to handle.

Our problem is our tendency to sin –

our tendency for *selfish, indulgent nastiness*.

When I tell this story from Luke, I refer to the tempter as 'one's own worst enemy',

because isn't our worst enemy the voice of doubt in ourselves,

the quiet craving for what others have,

the urgent resentment of not getting one's way?

So, Jesus is tempted to use powers he is assumed to have as the Son of the Creator;

It is assumed that he is able to turn stone into bread.

But this would be to turn something from *what it is* to *what it is not*.

In the natural world, inorganic material like a rock

does not become organic like a plant.

When Jesus does a miracle, it is an enlargement or a speeding up,

but never a disruption of the path of a natural process.

Jesus honors the integrity of the natural world and its laws.

In defending himself, Jesus relies on quotes from scripture, saying, "It is written..."

He rejects an easy way to satisfy his hunger, and in Luke he simply says,

that people do not live by bread alone.

Willard, p.3

In telling this story, I also borrow part of Jesus' answer from Matthew –
that it is the *Word of God* we live by; and to this, I add
the United Church of Christ's bold claim that...

“Humanity does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that God is still speaking.”

The second temptation is about power, prestige, and loyalty,
again assuming Jesus as the Son of God is in control of everything.

In response, Jesus uses scripture once more like a sword to deflect an attack, saying,
“It is written...”

Don't we know that when someone offers access to power, they are not the source,
but just a middleman who got it from someone/somewhere else,
just like the powers that be, running our world these days,
indirectly as Big Oil, Big Pharmaceuticals, Wall Street,
the so-called Military-Industrial Complex, and so forth.

None of these things are worthy of our complete devotion and loyalty,
as Jesus puts things in perspective by putting the devil back in its place
as part of the created order,
for God has no equal and Jesus was not about to accept second best.

The third temptation is about the dangers – and insanity,
of taking scripture too literally, like jumping off a building
because the Bible tells us angels will catch us from falling.

At the same time, this story reminds us how the commandments of God
are like the Law of Gravity, because if you ignore it, you are going to get hurt.

However, what makes this third challenge especially remarkable
is *how* Jesus responds and brings the temptations to a stop.

Twice Jesus defended himself quoting scripture, saying,

“It is written...”, “It is written...”

but the third time scripture quotes were used against him...

Then, Jesus replies,

“It is said...” or “It is spoken”, such that he is speaking for himself,
and when you speak for yourself, you're not willing to accept second best.

The words that he said can be found in scripture,

but he is now claiming these words as his own, speaking as the Son of God.

The temptations lost their power and crumbled before him,

like they would for any of us when we speak or act from our hearts.

This is a proof text for people to be who they are going to be – just like Jesus.

When we come through the fires of truth, nothing is left,

but the gold of who God created us to be.

This is the ‘born again’ experience – when we shed what is false and hurtful to
claim our affiliation as true human beings in the family of God.

Willard, p.4

I think of LGBT people who risk everything – family relations, career, even one’s life, for the daring stand to be true to oneself.

I think of African-Americans striving to be themselves – a minority even outnumbered by other minorities, yet whose cause reaches out to others in oppressive circumstances.

I think of women who must struggle with the cultural biases against them even in modern as well as traditional cultures.

I think of anyone who is tempted to think less of themselves, because of someone else’s system of beliefs and priorities.

The theologian Paul Tillich said, “You are accepted” – we are accepted by God who created us and asks only that we give up that which is false and hurtful to us, and that we should seek this for others as well.

This is not just about pleasing God who sits back in celestial splendor, because our God desires what is good for us for our sake.

Jesus returned from the wasteland and began to speak publicly about his vision of a Kingdom as a beloved community that is possible, gathering people to him who would listen.

He finally returned to his hometown synagogue and set forth his mission reading Isaiah 61:1-2 a – proclaiming good news for poor people, freedom for the oppressed, insight for the arrogant, healing and forgiveness for those wounded in life, and reconciliation with God.

They heard these words as his own when he said,
“*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” [Luke 4:21^b]
“Today, these words have come true as you hear them...”

The Lenten Season lasts for 40 days remembering Jesus’ 40 days in the desert as well as a symbolic reminder of Moses and the Children of Israel on their 40 year sojourn in the desert.

It is also the time when we reflect on Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his destiny for crucifixion *and resurrection*.

Jesus’ decision to go to Jerusalem is prompted by the event of John the Baptist’s assassination – and that is when the story of the temptations continues...

On other occasions, the enemy would try again and each time Jesus was ready and grew stronger – like gold refined by fire.

The death of John was a terrible blow, but the greater the evil, the greater the good that must arise to overcome it – and Jesus does so with humor...

Willard, p.5

In Matthew 14 when Jesus hears of the death of John the Baptist,
he retreats by boat to a desolate shore of the Galilee,
to grieve for John and reflect on what he must do next.

The people upon hearing this news, go ahead of him on foot
to wait for him on the beach, to console him as well as to get help
out of their own fears and needs.

Jesus responds by healing and loving them – with no time to mourn himself.

But then – as if it suddenly occurs to him,

he tells the disciples to feed the thousands of people there.

When they say they can't do it, Jesus uses what they have of loaves and fishes;
and instead of turning the rocks of that desolate place into bread,

he turns bread into more bread – as if to mock that original temptation.

Later, he sends the disciples back in their boat across the Galilee,

but their progress is limited '*for the wind was against them*' [Matt. 14:24^b]

The word for 'wind' in Greek and Hebrew also means 'spirit'

and this was an "opposing wind" – symbolizing a wind that is an "enemy".

Then the disciples see someone walking on the sea and imagine it is an evil spirit,
but it's Jesus, like the Spirit/Wind of God

hovering over the watery chaos of Creation.

Again, as if mocking the second temptation to leap off a building in a single bound,
Jesus walks on water defiant of the stormy wind.

Peter the Rock steps out of the boat to meet him, but his boldness fails
when he takes his eyes off Jesus to see only the "opposing wind".

Even though he can swim, he is terrified and cries out for help,

"Lord, save me!" He cries out what is called, "The Jesus Prayer",

"Kyrie, eleison!" The most ancient prayer, "God help me!"

Jesus reached out his hand and caught him!

"Hah! Backsliding believer! How could you doubt?"

Together, they get into the boat and the opposing wind goes away...

Sometimes, it takes decades to look back on your life and see how you have grown,
to see how you have survived the trials of your life,

to see how the gold of who you are came through the fire.

I don't think there is a hell, but I do think there are the fires of truth
that we all have to pass through.

I don't think we are judged for what we do, but rather for the habit of our hearts,
for the habit of how we make room for the Holy Spirit,

the Life Breath of Holiness, the Spirit of love to work in our lives.

I think what God is looking for is how well we love ourselves enough

to be ourselves and to help others to do the same – just like Jesus...

Amen

*Our lesson from Isaiah 55:1-9 speaks of hopeful visions of abundance,
cooperation between nations, mercy, and the unfolding of God's plans
in unexpected ways...*

- [1] All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!
Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!
Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!
- [2] Why spend money for what isn't food, and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.
- [3] Listen and come to me; listen, and you will live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful loyalty to David.
- [4] Look, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a prince and commander of peoples.
- [5] Look, you will call a nation you don't know,
a nation you don't know will run to you because of the Lord your God,
the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.
- [6] Seek the Lord when he can still be found;
call him while he is yet near.
- [7] Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes.
Let them return to the Lord so that he may have mercy on them,
to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness.
- [8] My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
[9] Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 4:1-21

- [1] And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit,
returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit
- [2] for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil.
And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry.
- [3] The devil said to him,
“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”
- [4] And Jesus answered him,
“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’”
- [5] And the devil took him up,
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time,
[6] and said to him,
“To you I will give all this authority and their glory;
for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.
[7] If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.”
- [8] And Jesus answered him,
“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve.’”
- [9] And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple,
and said to him,
“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here;
[10] for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,’
[11] and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”
- 12 And Jesus answered him,
“It is said, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”
- [13] And when the devil had ended every temptation,
he departed from him until an opportune time.
- [14] And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee,
and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country.
[15] And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.
- [16] And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up;
and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day.
And he stood up to read;
[17] and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah.
He opened the book and found the place where it was written,
[18] “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
[19] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”
- [20] And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down;
and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.
- [21] And he began to say to them,
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”