



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 1 (C)

Hunger for the Word

[RCL] Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

What strikes the reader and listener of the lectionary this morning is the eternal echo of God's Word in Scripture. We hear it in the phrase "forty days and nights," a familiar set of numbers found both in the Hebrew Scriptures and here in the gospels; in the use of the phrase "not by bread alone;" and in the quotation of the marvelous Psalm 91, which offers a vision and a promise of angelic protection from temptation.

The realization that it was Jesus who used the words of Scripture as the greatest shield against temptation offers further confirmation of the power of the Word.

Luke tells a story that has been told by Matthew in a similar manner and by the laconic Mark in only two short verses. In all three instances, Jesus' fasting in the wilderness comes after the tender declaration by the Spirit of God to the newly baptized Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And immediately, the Tempter arrives.

We can pause for a few minutes to contemplate the drama of this story told here in the simplest metaphorical language. When and why did Jesus recount this experience to his disciples—for it could only have been reported by him who lived it—we don't know. We can imagine them all at twilight, gathered around their Teacher, confessing their own temptations, bewildered by them, and Jesus, in his mercy, telling them, "You are not alone." The enormity of the temptations he encountered after God affirmed him as his beloved Son cannot be described in our limited language. There is much symbolic reference to the disciples' own culture and traditions—the forty days, the wilderness, the quoting of Scripture, the pinnacle of the temple. Forty days stand for a long time, for a fast that lasts for quite a while as long as water is available. There are many who have experienced the kind of hunger that gnaws at one's flesh when one is truly famished—some because of illness, others because of the deprivations of war. It is an unrelenting hunger bringing with it a weakness that cannot be described unless experienced. And in this weakened state, there is nothing more tempting than the offer of food. Yet this offer by Satan comes with the temptation of the quick fix, of magic. This is not how God works. Bread is vital for our survival, but not bread alone. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, but Luke does not complete the quote, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus uses the Word to silence

the enemy. The needs of the body must be satisfied, but not at the expense of our souls. Only the Word who emanates from the Father eternally can offer us the strength to withstand the temptations that result from such needs.

In the second temptation, we hear a response that is probably never found among lesser human beings. The hunger for power and money, for control, and for the exploitation of others runs rampant in today's world. It was thus also during the Roman Empire. The devil's words are frightening. He claims all authority, "for it has been given over to me," he says, "and I give it to anyone I please." We pause to ask, "Who gave him such authority?" and to conclude: "So that's why the world is in such a mess." Whatever the meaning of this claim to authority, we hear a resounding No in the answer Jesus gives, again from Scripture. His devotion to God is unequivocal, his obedience total, his love single-minded. He cannot be tempted away from the worship of the One God.

The third temptation is the most intriguing because in this instance Satan himself quotes Scripture and does so most effectively. He chooses the words of the beautiful, comforting Psalm 91, as we know it:

*For he shall give his angels charge over you...
they shall bear you in their hands,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.*

Again, here is a universal experience. Who among us has not stumbled against a stone, against temptation? Moreover, we are reminded once more that the Enemy also quotes Scripture, many times cleverly, to silence the Spirit. Look at how the Bible is used as a weapon against the children of Light in today's world. This is the most seductive power of the Enemy. We must always be alert to the misuse of the Word, to the exploitation of the good news for the purpose of hurting the least of these, our brothers and sisters. Jesus will not have it. He relies on Scripture as he responds with clarity, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Throughout history, human beings have tried to bargain with their Creator, to test the one who has given them life. We see it in all mythologies and even between the ancient Hebrews and their God. Jesus rejects such bargaining even when it uses the words of Scripture. What did the disciples take away from this remarkable story? After the Ascension, we hear Peter use the words of Scripture repeatedly when he teaches, interprets, and preaches the Good News of Christ.

What should stay with us? We see how the Tempter arrives when we are at our height of spiritual awareness: maybe after preaching a fine sermon or after doing something good for someone else. Temptation arrives when we feel that we are so close to who we are called to be that we run the danger of pride and a fall. This is a most opportune time for the Tempter. Stones surround us; we are always prone to dash our foot against them. Who will bear us up? Most of us resort to prayer which comes in many forms. The most reliable and the strongest, as we see here, is to use the words given to us in Scripture. In The Episcopal Church, we have the additional treasure of the Book of Common Prayer. They come to us,

these ancient words, echoing through the centuries, tried and blessed, because they have become part of us, of our subconscious, and our memory. This passage reminds us not to neglect to read, study, and memorize the words of the Bible because we never know when they will serve as our two-edged sword or as our only shield against the Enemy. We must be prepared.

Let us then recall and rest upon the Word and the Word will not fail us. As St. Paul reminds us:

“The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart.”

May it always be so. Amen.

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