



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 1ST LENT

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11 AND LUKE 4:1-13

MARCH 6, 2022

“THREE TEMPTATIONS ... THREE NO’S”

In the gospel for the 1st Sunday of Lent, our Lord overcomes what Martin Luther called “*the unholy trinity*” of the devil, the world and our own flesh. In the stories of the Transfiguration and the Baptism of our Lord, the event Luke says immediately preceded his temptation – Jesus hears directly the approving voice of his Father. In his temptation Jesus is alone and must remember the words of his Father for them to be of any help to him. Here is a significant lesson in our lesson – while faith comes from what is heard... faithful living, impossible to conceive apart from temptation, arises out of what, of that we have heard, we manage to remember.

In our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy, the faithful response of giving first fruit offerings to the Lord, results from Israel remembering what the Lord had done for them. This helped them avoid the temptation of prideful self-sufficiency. Memory awakened gratitude. Luke tells us Satan tries to mess with Jesus’ memory, pressing to see what, of what God had said, he would recall. Amazing how the evil one remembers God’s words... deplorable how those words are twisted or misused. In the Garden of Eden, it was “*did God really say.*” In the wilderness it was “*if you are God’s son*”, a direct challenge to what God said at Jesus baptism.

“*Well then, if you are God’s son, tell this stone here to become bread.*” Yes, Jesus was hungry, but temptation is not always an appeal to our weakness. Sometimes it plays to our strengths. Adam and Eve were created in God’s image and God had them given dominion over the earth. Why not all of it then? Adam and Eve at best “misheard God” or more likely, didn’t like everything they’d heard. In each instance of his temptation, our Lord’s response is “grounded resistance”. I’d much rather live positively, as many religions and philosophies these days tout - initiating good and productive things in life, having a life plan and a daily planner that would be the envy of all. Christianity would be a long, dull slog if all we did was resist. But our faith surrenders its power and forfeits relevance if it fails to resist. God’s word tells many things we should do. What it says we should resist is as important as what we should pursue.

In our story from Luke, we discover the kind of Messiah he will not be, the means he will not employ, the ends he will not pursue. Thus, we discover what kind of Christians we should not be, the means we will not employ, and ends we will not pursue, because they neither benefit or become us as bearers of Christ’s name.

Jesus would not use power for his own survival. Luther, in his explanation to the 4th petition – “*give us this day our daily bread*” says bread includes everything needed in life – an extensive list. But a person can suffer death if they try to live by *this* “bread alone.” Our temptation, as that of our Lord, is to make survival and “well-being” our highest aspiration by whatever means at our disposal. To this first temptation, if Jesus had not said “no”, there would have been no cross. Just turn stone to bread...and sinners into saints by way of command.

The second temptation of our Lord builds upon the first. The desire for personal well-being is natural – our bodies hunger and thirst and instinctively avoid danger because that is how they survive. It becomes sinful when satisfying our needs is our exclusive or primary desire to the exclusion of the praise of God – see once again our story from Deuteronomy. In tempting Jesus to throw in his lot in with the kingdoms of the world – usually government but which can include government's allies in business, education, medical/scientific and media communities, Satan presents our Lord another way to insure survival – his own, but more to the point, his cause.

In Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" there is a moment when Judas, imagined as speaking in the present, asks Jesus why he came "*at such a backward time in such a strange land*". Judas taunts him saying "*if you'd come today, you would have reached a whole nation - Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.*" There you have it...Satan suggests Jesus safeguard his cause by enlisting allies...the kingdoms of the world – the resources they have to get something done. Jesus says no. This would be idolatry, something the kingdoms of this world (and its allies) seek from people. Of all weeks we don't need any reminding about how the kingdoms of this world advance their causes. If Jesus had not said "no" to this temptation, there would have been no cross.

Skillfully employing Scripture himself in the final temptation, (Satan does remember the things God has said... to his constant annoyance), the evil one suggests that Jesus, "*if he is the Son of God*", act like one, and trust Psalm 91 – eliminate all speculation and ambiguity. The religious leaders, soldiers and common folk standing below would all see him dive from the pinnacle of the temple to a soft landing in the arms of angels...in an instant you'd have the whole nation. But this is the worst temptation of all, and one far too often copied – using God to secure our own ends – making God an instrument of personal advancement.

If the dare was accepted, there would be no misunderstanding of Jesus – no need for crisscrossing the country healing and teaching, caring for the poor, speaking in parables and having to explain them. If people shouted "*Jesus is Lord*" this way...well, by now I hope you see the endgame...if Jesus didn't say no, there would be no cross. To Luther's "unholy trinity" the devil, the world and our sinful flesh – Jesus said "no", so together they crucified Him. They don't like being told "no." Their well-being is at stake, after all!

So, what about us? Can your faith say no as Jesus' did? No. So never forget Jesus had you in mind when to his temptations he said no. Without which there would have been no cross. His last temptation was the crowning culmination of his first ones. And therefore we, whom you remember, God also calls his children, when we pray for the coming of his kingdom, the doing of his will, and for daily bread, they will be given – they have been given...Jesus being their whole and wonderful answer. AMEN