

Deut. 26:1-11
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Feb. 21, 2010
Bakersfield, CA

"Tempted to Leave It Be"

This past Wednesday was "Ash Wednesday" marking the beginning of Lent. A number of you attended the service and received the ashes; a traditional sign of repentance. On that day we began our remembrance of Christ's journey through suffering, on the way to the cross, and then his resurrection. Those events are essential to understanding his life, and that is why we must be very careful in trying to understand what happened to him.

1. Temptations Luke 4

After he was baptized by John the Baptist Jesus went into the wilderness. There he spent 40 long days alone and hungry, and was presented with the temptations: the allure of enough food to satisfy, more than enough power to rule the world, and a soul-stirring experience that will wake him up from the meditations of the desert. He refused each one.

Our Lenten journey is patterned after Jesus' time in the desert, for him a stripping away of everything external and everything that has gone before so he can begin God's work. For us a time of paring down and stripping away the things that distract us from God. But most of us tend to be awful at resisting temptation. Public figures attract our attention for yielding to large temptations (Tiger Woods, John Edwards, Mark Sanford, etc.) -- money, sex, power -- and their stories are fascinating and dismaying. As individuals, smaller temptations can rule our lives with the same hold. Looking at the culture around us, we may be tempted to believe that not only are our temptations not so bad, but they might be positive opportunities and even deserved rewards. We rationalize our giving in to temptation. In our day the idea of resisting the things we have a desire for seems quaint, if not absurd. If we want something, why not have it? Why bother to say no?

Knowing this about human nature the devil came to Jesus saying, "Give up, don't use your power for anything new. Make bread for yourself out of stones, get rich quick as all the others did and do!" Jesus was confronted with questions that assail us even today. What shall it be: wonder bread, or bread of wonder? immediate gratification of the stomach, or be filled with God's eternal nourishment?

The devil continued, "Indulge in glory and fame and the praise of others just like everyone else!" And tempted him again, "Rule over the whole world the way I do and all others wish to. Forget about a new start, forget about an alternative. Be realistic and tough and leave things as they are, always have been, and always will be."

We know what it is to want to leave things be. We do it all the time, rather than risk eyebrows raised, or challenges, or changes in ourselves. We're always tempted to just leave things the way they are: that broken relationship wasn't my fault so why should I take a step to repair it? My input or help won't make any difference so why get involved? Oh that little flaw isn't really a serious sin, so why bother with it? My few dollars won't make any difference so why give? Jesus can get along fine without me getting all gung-ho for him...

I have been tempted since arriving at FUMC to just leave things be. I could forget about any vision, any big dream for God here with us. I could just be a nice fellow, preach a decent sermon, visit folks in the hospital, go through Sunday services, and then indulge in my own hobbies and diversions. It is tempting for us, as a church, to leave things as they are, make no significant moves, or take any risks for the future. We

could just try to preserve what's already here.

Back there in the wilderness, at every temptation Jesus responded by quoting Scripture to counter the devil's snares. By doing so he called upon his Father, the Lord our God. It was his confession of faith in the One who is above all others.

This is our path as well. God gave us His Word not only for information, but also for strength and transformation. Our faith in the written Word of Scripture and the living Word of Jesus opens our hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit, who can strengthen us, teach us, and transform us. We have hearts He can fill to give us hope for our own lives and a better world, and strength to join his big vision for God. As the Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

2. Confession Romans 10:8b-13

When we speak of confession most of the time it is about admitting our sins and asking forgiveness. But there is a confession that comes before. Paul makes clear, "...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The genuine belief is a conviction that gives us the courage to say, "Yes, I do believe Jesus rose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God; and that he is the Lord of life." This is why, whenever we receive new members into the congregation they are asked to confess Jesus as lord. It is the foundation of the Christian life and entry into the church.

We don't use the term "lord" much these days. But in the first-century Greco-Roman world (new Testament times), "lord" (**κυριος**) was used as a title for superiors ("excellency") or used for common respect ("sir"). Strangers sometimes greeted Jesus with **κυριος** - "Sir." It was a natural title for gods, and, as Paul writes (1 Corinthians 8:5), was used for the many gods people called upon in the Mediterranean world.

When Jews spoke of God they used this Greek term as well. They considered Yahweh their LORD - **κυριος**. Yet when the Roman Emperor appropriated the title they were pretty sure that he meant something more than "sir" or "excellency. Consequently some Jews refused to call Caesar "Lord." The problem got worse for Christians. From Augustus onward emperors were dubbed -- at least by some, and especially in the Eastern Mediterranean - "Savior and Lord."*

This reminds us of those times in recent memory when governments (and their leaders) claimed such a status - the savior state. Christians have found themselves in conflict with such governments as well.

After his resurrection Christians referred to Jesus as Lord (**κυριος**) in the same manner as referring to God. It was their word for the one who controlled everything and who reflected and revealed God's nature. Paul expressed it succinctly saying, that God declared Jesus "to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord..." (Romans 1:4). Others might believe in many lords or trust the Lord Emperor, but Christians, when using the word Lord (**κυριος**), expressed the faith that there is one supreme ruler (1 Corinthians 8:6) who is merciful and forgiving and who rescues us from sin for a life with God and others. Paul promises, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

3. Faith in Action

Our words that confess him as Lord are necessary. But for such a statement of faith to have meaning it must be put into practice. You know the old saying that it is easier to preach ten sermons, or listen to twenty, than it is to live one. Well, your life and mine are sermons.

One of the other readings for today comes from Deuteronomy (Second Law). "When you have come into the land the Lord your God is giving you...you shall take some of the first of all the fruit and put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling place for his name." Bringing the first fruits of the produce of the land - or in our day we could say the opportunities - God has given us, is an act of thanks and an act of faithfulness. God asks of us (nay, expects of us) more than words. How many of us, when it comes to our offering, bring the left-overs or nothing at all?

Tempting it is; very tempting to enjoy right now the pleasures or comforts before us and leave God out of the picture. It's funny how some folks blame God for the difficulties that come their way, but when good fortune befalls them they don't thank God. It would be tempting for us, as a congregation, to now coast after this third significant step into the future (1. multi-media system; 2. Worship/Music Director, 3. Narthex). Why take this next step of hiring a full-time Director of Youth Ministries? Maybe we've done enough, let's just leave it be. It is equally tempting to believe we did all this ourselves. It is tempting to forget that we need God; to forget that God provides for the future, and to ignore the greater plans God has for us.

We know what Jesus did. He refused the temptations, he chased the devil away. He lived big for God; he took on God's great vision and fulfilled it, though not without some troubles. (In fact it set him on the path to suffering and unavoidable death - that was *his* calling.) And Jesus imparted to us a great truth. He said (John 16:33), "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." In this world we *will* have trouble; it's a given. So, if we live small, afraid to join him in his great venture for God, we'll still have trouble. What's the point, then, of living small. Why not live big; live big for God? There is hope for you and me, and for us together. In him we will find a strength to withstand the temptations. We just entered the season of Lent, a time of preparation for Easter, Christ's resurrection, in history and in your life. Do something, make a change to join him, to start living big or bigger. Don't just leave things as they are. Enter a new discipline or class for His sake. We have a great class for you, "Serving From the Heart," that's perfect for helping you live big for God. Sign up!

In the same manner, we as His body the church, need not fear taking the next steps to fulfill his purposes. He will be our captain, and we his company, if we are to march into a big future for this church; to win the world for Christ.

The vibrant, future-oriented church says, "WIN THE WORLD FOR CHRIST"

The tired Church says, "WIN FIVE FOR CHRIST"

The dying church says, "DON'T LOSE TOO MANY"

Which will it be for us? Will we light our future with the sacred fire of Christ or the wildfire of our culture.

Wonder bread, or bread of wonder? Keep your eyes on the one who refuses to turn stones into bread just for cheap popularity. He is the source of all hope and strength for our future.

*[By the second century, especially in Asia Minor (modern Turkey, provenance of the book of Revelation), emperor worship thrived. Polycarp was a Christian leader in second-century Smyrna (Asia Minor). He ran afoul of the authorities because he wouldn't say "Caesar is Lord" and offer sacrifice at the public (pagan) festivities. He said he respected earthly leaders; yet he clearly recognized what his fellow citizens meant when they included Caesar with their other gods and declared him "Lord."

Polycarp's final answer to his accusers was: "For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King

who saved me?" The church at Smyrna wrote a letter describing the interrogation of Polycarp and his execution. The church ended the account by noting (as usual in the ancient world, Luke 1:5; 2:1-2; 3:1-2) who the officials were at the time. With the officials "standing in the background" of the report, the church added, "but Jesus Christ was reigning forever." They knew what a lord was, and they knew who the Lord was.]