

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, MA – February 21, 2010

Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Lent – Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland – The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, Rector

We began Lent last Wednesday – Ash Wednesday – with the invitation, among other things, to “read and meditate on God’s holy Word.” We were also invited to observe Lent as a time for “self-examination and repentance,” and with “prayer, fasting, and self-denial:”

“I invite you,” the liturgy says, “in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

It is no accident that the gospel for this First Sunday in Lent reflects these themes. The Church’s historic invitation to the observance of Lent is based on this story of Jesus led by the Spirit in the wilderness after his baptism in the Jordan River. In the gospel the Spirit pervades and connects all these early stories, from Jesus’ baptism, through the temptations in the wilderness, to the day back in Nazareth when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah about being anointed to preach good news to the poor and begins his public ministry. The Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism; fills and leads him in the wilderness; and rests upon him as he reads in the synagogue in his hometown. Never does God leave Jesus alone without the abiding, life-sustaining Spirit. Never does God leave us without the same irrevocable gift, God’s comforting and life-sustaining Spirit.

So, today we are in the wilderness. Look at what happens in the wilderness. The devil tempts Jesus. But, look carefully at how this happens, and at what exactly goes on between the devil and Jesus. What is so interesting is that it ends up being, really, a “conversation with scripture” that Jesus has with the devil. The conversation takes place, of course, in response to the famous three temptations that the devil presents to Jesus. The temptations themselves are interesting. When we think of temptations, we usually think of things that somehow are ultimately bad things. We think of things we might be lured to do, to use, or to acquire that in the end really wouldn’t be good for us or for others, whether it is a pile of candy or a fast track to promotion and power. Temptations are things that look appealing in the moment, but are destructive in the long run. What is intriguing about the temptations that the devil presents in the gospel, though, is that they are truly good things. They are, in fact, the very things that the gospel and Jesus’ ministry are about; indeed, they are the very things that we pray for every week and that as Christians we are supposed to be working for everyday: feeding the hungry (changing “stone” to bread), building the kingdom (subjecting all things to the authority of divine justice), and trusting God completely with our lives and the lives of all we love (on their hands [God’s] angels will bear you up). These are the best things not the worst, good things not bad ones. And, that is what makes the temptations so

powerful. They are virtually the gospel, but here in the wilderness they are supreme temptations.

So, the devil comes to Jesus in the most powerful way that the devil can – just like the way the devil comes to us, disguised as the good. The devil comes where Jesus’ desire is the greatest, but maybe also where his weakness is greatest. Pressed to his limit, Jesus responds from the resource that has most deeply formed him: the scriptures of his Jewish background; he calls upon the faith of his “wandering Aramean” ancestor (Jacob). “One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus says in the face of the temptation to change stone to bread, and by implication to feed the hungry world. The verse comes from Deuteronomy 8:3, in which Moses admonishes the people, as they are about to enter the Promised Land, to remember the “long way” that God led them “these forty years in the wilderness,” as Moses says, and to remember that though they were hungry in that time God fed them with manna to teach them that they did not have their lives “by bread alone,” but by the unfailing presence of God who stayed with them. It is, in other words, a new relevance and meaning that Jesus finds for an old text, a teaching from Deuteronomy that he would have heard in his own formative community of faith worshipping week by week in the synagogue in Nazareth. Suddenly he is in *conversation* with that text as it claims an immediate, urgent relevance to the crisis of the present moment. No longer is it history, something Moses said to his ancestors thousands of years before. Now it is his resource with which to respond to the devil in a moment when everything will depend on how he answers.

“Then the devil showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.” “To you I will give their glory and all this authority,” the devil says. Again, Jesus answers out of his people’s scripture – perhaps the most faith-shaping part of that scripture, again from Deuteronomy, where Moses has just taught the *she’ma*, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” Moses elaborates on its meaning in Deuteronomy 6:13, and says, “The Lord your God you shall fear and serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.” Again, the gospel constructs a conversation between Jesus and his people’s scripture, by which the ancient text becomes a powerful present resource to face a powerful present challenge. “Worship the Lord your God,” Jesus says to the devil, “and serve only him.”

From the pinnacle of Jewish faith the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple. Now the devil has caught on and the devil joins the conversation with scripture, incorporating even the scripture itself into the final temptation. The devil’s inspiration comes from the very psalm we sang here this morning, our psalm just a few minutes ago. The devil is into the conversation now, and quotes Psalm 91:11-12:

“For [the Lord] shall give his angels charge over you,
to keep you in all your ways.

“They shall bear you in their hands,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.”

Two can play at this game, the devil sees; the scripture is a malleable thing. The devil strikes at the core of the resource on which Jesus has relied thus far. Which use of the scripture will prevail? And, the conversation is all the more charged, for it is happening at the epicenter of religious and political culture in Jesus' time – the Jerusalem Temple, Herod's grand edifice, the symbol of religious collusion with imperial might, and the place where ancient Israel's religious leaders worked side by side with Rome's occupying commanders to perpetuate the people's poverty and suffering. Jesus' last answer comes again directly from Moses, God's instrument of the people's ancient liberation, who taught them in Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

"When the devil had finished every test," the gospel says, "he departed from him until an opportune time." The "opportune time" would come again in Jerusalem, when the devil would enter the heart of Judas Iscariot and inspire his betrayal on Maundy Thursday. Curiously, Lent is framed by the work of the devil, from the wilderness temptations to the betrayal of a human heart. And, the conversation with scripture continues.

Marc Borg, in our Lenten study book Conversations with Scripture says that many of us grew up (maybe like Jesus too) with the impression that the Bible is a divine product. "Pronouncements that the Bible is 'the Word of God' and 'inspired by God,'" Marc Borg says, "were understood to mean that the Bible comes from God in a way that no other book does." Thus the Bible mattered in a singular way and held its authority; it had a kind of "divine guarantee to be true," Borg says. Many of us grew up seeing the Bible as this kind of source for both moral absolutes and historical facts. But, Borg says, this way of seeing the Bible has become untenable for many people.

Many people today are finding a new way of seeing the Bible, Marc Borg says, not unlike the way Jesus found new power for old texts in the wilderness. The new way includes seeing the Bible as a human product, not a divine one, and as sacred not because God decreed literally it but because our forebears canonized it and God continues to speak to us through it. In the wilderness a new conversation with scripture became lifesaving for Jesus. In Lent it can be so for us also.

"I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word."

Join us, wont you this Lent, for a "conversation with scripture?"