

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Into the Fire: Liar, Liar”

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When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.

Deuteronomy 6:10-13

I bring you greetings this morning from the New Providence Church in Maryville. It is a joy to be with you this morning, and to have been given the challenge of preaching on this one temptation from Luke’s gospel. Typically, we hear all three of these together, and the message comes off as a sort of generic, “don’t do those things.” But this was a brilliant idea your pastors had to pull these apart for three separate weeks, because it allows a deeper dive into each one.

Matthew and Luke are the only two gospel writers who describe the temptations in detail, but while this is the second temptation for Luke—the devil taking Jesus up to a high place and offering power and authority—it is the third temptation in Matthew. Matthew writes to a primarily Jewish audience, and he wants to present Jesus as the new Moses, the new lawgiver, so the mountain (reminiscent of Mt. Sinai) figures prominently. The first act of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew’s gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, what Luke refers to as simply “the sermon on the plain.”

Luke, on the other hand, ends the temptations at the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, because Jerusalem is central to the entire Luke-Acts story. In Acts 1, Jesus tells his disciples, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to all the ends of the earth.” Ever-expanding circles of influence, but for Luke, that all begins in Jerusalem.

Listen now as we hear God’s word from Luke 4:5-8:

Then the devil led Jesus up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve the Lord only.’”

Luke 4:5-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and redeemer. And Lord, if the words of this servant are not yours, then may you have a special word for us today, for we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Matthew, Mark and Luke—the three synoptic gospel writers—all agree that the temptation in the wilderness is a watershed moment for Jesus. They place this story at the beginning of his public ministry, because these 40 days are when Jesus figures out who he is by figuring out who he is not.

The temptations show that the devil knows the words of scripture well. Jesus, however, understands the heart of the scripture, and how the ancient words of God are to take on flesh in him. The triad is common to Jewish folklore:ⁱ once, twice, a third time—with every temptation, Jesus responds: *not this, not this, not this.*ⁱⁱ

The first temptation, which Jay preached on last week, is to turn stones into bread. Remember, that's the lowest rung on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. When you're hungry, it's nearly impossible to focus on anything else, which is troubling when you consider how many children in this country are struggling with school—either online or in person—while 1 out of every 4 American families is currently experiencing food insecurity.ⁱⁱⁱ

But turning within himself to the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus finds the strength to say no, and so the devil moves to this second temptation.

I tell you, I've preached on this passage more times than I can count, but this week I noticed something I'd never paid attention to before: the devil says, *"I will give you glory and authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please."*

I had to scratch my head. "It has been given over to me?" When did that happen? No place that I can see. Back in Deuteronomy, the Israelites are reminded that all things come from God: *cisterns that you did not hew and vineyards and olive gardens that you did not plant...* There's no indication that authority over any of that has been given to anyone else. *The LORD your God you shall fear; the LORD you shall serve, and by the LORD's name alone you shall swear.*

The psalmist says it clearly: *the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it.*

In other words, this looks to me like one colossal lie: *"It has been given to me, and I give it to anyone I please."*

Says who? Not the Bible I read. We Presbyterians have a particular attachment to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, the idea that all of life is under God's control and held in God's loving care. The Barmen Declaration, one of our confessional statements, was written in the run-up to WWII. As the Nazi Party was rising to power and demanding total allegiance, the Confessing Church in Germany dared to say, *We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords.*

"It has been given to me, and I give it to anyone I please?" No way. The devil just doesn't have that authority. But it doesn't stop him from trying.

My friend Pam told me about a sermon she heard at a conference a few years back. Before the lectures and the workshops, they began each day with worship. Pam slid in as the service was starting; the preacher began to read the scripture, but Pam was still getting settled, and you know how you do—she sort of zoned out during the reading.

Then the preacher began her sermon by saying, "I want to tell you the story of a minister some of you may be familiar with." Everyone's ears perked up, wondering who that familiar person might be. The preacher went on

to talk about a totally dysfunctional church, a minister who had led this congregation out of some trouble, but then they'd fallen into hard times again, and so the minister had gone away to seek God, and seek discernment.

While the minister was gone, the congregation got the elders together and went to the associate pastor and demanded that the associate pastor do something about the budget right now; it couldn't wait.

As the preacher was telling this story, Pam said she felt terrible—for the minister, and the associate pastor. She couldn't believe the preacher was talking about it at all. Why would she do that? This should be confidential; it felt like a betrayal of that whole congregation to put their story out there in this public forum.

It wasn't until the very end of the sermon that Pam realized: the preacher was talking about Moses and Aaron.

You know: two people we might all be familiar with. Moses has led the people out of slavery in Egypt and they find themselves in the wilderness again. Moses goes away to seek God. But he's gone longer than they expect, and the people demand that Aaron do something.

They demand that Aaron make them feel safe and secure, comfort them, empower them. Assure them that everything is going to be ok.

So Aaron tells them to bring all the gold they can find from among their belongings, and he fashions it into a golden calf. And they bow down and worship it.

That seems so unsophisticated to us. We know there's no real power there.^{iv} But you know what? I don't think the Israelites believe there's any power there either. That calf is just a melted down amalgamation of their own rings and earrings, their holiday flatware, their Rolex watches.

And still, they bow down to worship it.

Because like us, they're looking for certainty. They're looking for some tangible assurance that their hopes and dreams will be fulfilled, that everything's going to be ok for them and for those they love.

Because sometimes it's easier to swallow the lie than hold out for the truth.

It's a story as old as time, the Faustian bargain: selling one's soul in exchange for worldly knowledge or pleasure or power. The Faust legend thrives in our consumer society, particularly in a culture of instant gratification. From credit cards to fast food, we opt for immediate pleasure even knowing that it brings long-term pain.^v

So the temptation of the insta-solution, the answer to all our problems, the quick fix is always out there in front of us—even when we know those things don't have the power to give us what we really want or need. There are plenty of tempting alternatives, but God alone offers what our hearts desire.

As Jay said last week, the forty days of Lent have their roots in these forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness. And yet we have turned them into a caricature of their original intent.

A few years ago, one of our New Providence members told me that her granddaughter announced she was giving up rollerblading for Lent. Nancy said, "Honey, I didn't even know that you *owned* rollerblades." Her granddaughter replied, "I don't! Doesn't that work out great?"

All our meager attempts to “give something up for Lent” miss the mark. See, the most dangerous temptation isn’t usually temptation *toward something*—probably something we shouldn’t be doing in the first place. Instead, it’s temptation *away from something*—namely, our connection to God and the identity we receive in and through that relationship.

But just like Jesus in the wilderness, the devil, or life, or fate, or circumstance or whatever you want to call it is forever seeking to undermine our trust. The devil tries to erode our confidence that we have enough, that we are enough, that we are worthy of God’s love. Bread, power, and safety. Or youth, beauty, and wealth. Or confidence, fame, and security. They’re all temptations to shift our allegiance away from God and toward something else that pledges something more.^{vi}

Even when we know it’s a lie.

When Jesus emerges from the wilderness, he has a clarity that could not come from anywhere else. It takes a long time: emptying, clearing out, letting go of what doesn’t belong—in order to discover what does. But in that wild space, Jesus finds what he needs. From *not this, not this, not this*, he now has the clarity to say, *this*.^{vii}

Our “*this*” will come from the same place: trusting the one who walks with us into our own desert places and provides for all our needs.

All glory to the One who has traveled this wilderness before;

All glory to the One who companions us on the journey;

All glory to the One who never lets us go.

Amen.

ⁱ Matt Fitzgerald, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 1*, p. 93.

ⁱⁱ Jan Richardson, “Lent 1: Into the Wilderness,” at paintedprayerbook.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Christianna Silva, “Food Insecurity in the U.S. by the Numbers,” at npr.com, September 27, 2020.

^{iv} Pam Driesell, “Worship as a Way of Life: Defying American Idols,” preached at Trinity Pres, Atlanta, Aug. 19, 2018.

^v Benjamin Ramm, “What the myth of Faust can teach us,” at BBC.com, September 26, 2017.

^{vi} David Lose, “Identity Theft” at davidlose.net, March 7, 2019.

^{vii} Richardson, op. cit.