

The Bethel Pulpit

Pastor John Swanson

March 10, 2019 - Lent 1



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Text: Luke 4:1-13

Today is not only a day where we are highlighting two of our ministry teams - the nurturing team and the community team - it is also the first Sunday in Lent. And since it is the first Sunday in Lent, our gospel passage always tells the story of Jesus' temptation.

I think it might be helpful to get some perspective as we reflect on this temptation story involving Jesus and the devil.

To gain some perspective, we first want to take a few steps back in Luke.

In the third chapter of Luke Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. Luke goes into great detail in describing Jesus'; baptism:

- After, all were baptized, including Jesus
- (While Jesus was praying) the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit came down to Jesus in bodily form like a dove
- And then a voice from heaven said, "you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Luke then creates Jesus' genealogy tree - going back from Jesus ... back past David, past Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, past Noah, Lamech, Methuselah ... all the way back to Adam.

After that, Luke tells us that Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit and goes from the Jordan out into the wilderness.

He says that Jesus was tempted by the devil for 40 days, during which time Jesus did not eat. We might quickly move past that part to get to the actual interaction between Jesus and the devil, but those 40 days of temptation and fasting was probably not something that Jesus quickly moved past.

But we get to these three temptation events and, however you might picture this happening in your own mind, the bottom line is that the devil and Jesus square off.

And in this squaring off, it becomes clear that the devil's purpose is to convince Jesus to reject the path of suffering and death that has been set before him and to instead follow a path of power and glory.

Temptation #1 – Stone into Bread

It is not simply an offer to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. Beyond that, the devil suggests that Jesus use his authority/his power for his own pleasure - making life easier and better.

To all of that, Jesus says no.

Temptation #2 – All the Kingdoms of the World.

Then the devil offers Jesus authority and power and glory over all the kingdoms of the world.

Again, Jesus says no.

Temptation #3 – Jumping from the Pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The devil tells him to jump off, knowing that God will send his angels to bring him safely to the group. It is almost as if the devil is saying to Jesus, here is the easy way to glory – no cross, no pain, no suffering, no rejection, no humiliation – only glory.

But even to that, Jesus says no.

To all that the devil offers, Jesus says no.

Again, and again, and again he says no.

Instead, Jesus says I am taking the way of suffering; I am taking the way of pain, the way of sadness, the way of emptiness, isolation, desperation ... in other words, Jesus is saying I am not taking any shortcuts. In fact, in our continued effort to gain perspective as we dissect this temptation story, we learn that the next thing that Jesus does is begin his ministry. And it is here that we see just how seriously Jesus took that promise to not take any shortcuts.

Jesus goes to his home town and in his home temple Jesus declares that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him because he has been anointed by God to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and to declare the year of the Lord.

That final perspective helps us to understand the next steps in Jesus' ministry. It is now clear as we see Jesus in Luke's Gospel that the ministry that he is embarking will be both amazing AND messy. And that then, provides us with some perspective today.

I remember one of my New Testament professors in seminary reading that passage from Luke where Jesus is in his home town temple. After reading, "... he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" he closed his Bible and said to all of us, "Sisters and brothers, that was Jesus' work then. IT IS OUR WORK TODAY!!"

The work we do at Bethel – the caring, the listening, the welcoming, the serving, the praying, the worshipping – it is Jesus' work, played out here and wherever we go to be the hands and feet of Christ.

It is indeed our work today. Amazing work. Messy work. Our work...today. Amen.