

“Sacred Presence”

Catherine Elsdon

Student Minister, Pastoral Care

Bloor Street United Church

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Reading: Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,
and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

In the text today, the devil offers Christ an easy way out. Jesus has been fasting in the desert for forty days and forty nights. And after fasting for forty days and forty nights in the desert, Matthew sums it up by saying, “He was hungry.” That might be a bit of an understatement. He was ravenous! The blistering, inescapable heat of the desert sun, the uncompromising cold of the desert nights — Jesus experiences all these physical trials and he is restless, exhausted, thirsty, and yes, hungry. Even before he confronts the devil, Jesus’ humanity is emphasized: he is hungry and the great tempter knows it. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

There are three temptations. In this one and the others, the devil is taunting Jesus with the possibility of escaping his humanness in order to be “god-like.” The devil quotes Psalm 91, encouraging Jesus to jump from the highest point of the temple and effectively fly — to defy gravity. Then the devil takes Jesus up to the top of a mountain and offers him all the power and luxuries of the world (“the kingdoms of the world and their splendour”). Political power and admiration could be his if he would just give in.

Will Jesus do it just to show the devil he can? Will he do it to prove himself? To fulfill everyone’s expectations of what the Son of God should be able to do? He *can* do it, so why doesn’t he?

All of these are temptations for Jesus to show definitively that he is the Messiah everyone is expecting. The Christ who was to establish justice and inaugurate the kingdom of God was traditionally a violent figure, overthrowing the power of evil with righteous force. A superman. A figure for which David was the paradigm. One feature of some Jewish expectations of the Messiah was that he would reproduce the miracle of the manna and that there would be a lavish supply of food in the messianic time. When the devil challenges Jesus to produce loaves of bread, he is hinting at this expectation. The question posed to us is: Will Jesus be the Son of God we anticipate? Will God come to us in the manner that we all expect or wish?

In a way, those messianic expectations of ancient times seem completely foreign to us today. Yet, I wonder if we don’t still place expectations on the way God should work in the world and in our own lives. Especially in trial and temptation, the deeper hardships of life that we all experience: the break-up of a family or a relationship, the

loss of a job, the onset of illness. In sadness and grief and tragedy, we naturally ask why. Why has God let this happen? Why isn't God doing what we expect God to do?

In my pastoral care experience, here with you and elsewhere, I have learned that in those trying moments, doctrine or theory is inadequate. Words fail us.

I have also learned that being present, physically and spiritually, sitting with someone through a trial or temptation, can be the most profound and powerful statement of faith possible. Being church means being present to each other through the joys and hardships of daily living. Being present through prayer and visits, the gift of a meal or a ride to the hospital. The support and sheer presence of someone during a time of difficulty provides the comfort of knowing that you are not alone. It is a profoundly Christ-like act.

Christ's temptation in the scripture today gives us a glimpse into what kind of Son of God Jesus will be. And the answer is surprising. In this passage, Jesus rejects easy outs. He rejects escape. He says no to our preconceived notions of what a powerful, glorious God might look like on earth or in a battle with the devil. If Jesus is king, then he is the meek king who conquers through suffering and solidarity, who lives out his own teaching of loving the enemy and being present to those in need. He does not escape from the human experience of a growling stomach or a humble life. Instead, Christ chooses to participate in the realities of creation. He experiences, with us, the joys and the pains, the sheer complexity, ambiguity and grittiness of human life.

We talk about the Incarnation, the embodiment of God, most frequently at Christmas when we remember Christ's birth. But during Lent, as we look ahead to the Cross, I invite you to keep in mind that death is also a part of the Incarnation story. Death is a universal human experience. Christ's birth, his life and his death demonstrate his profound presence in the realities of this world. They demonstrate God's wish to be with us in the beauty and the pain of creation. They demonstrate that God's purpose in creation is not to help us escape it but to redeem it. Christ confirms that creation is good, that our God is life affirming, that our God is present in this world.

Lent is a time to give things up and to take things up. We increase devotional practices like Bible study, prayer, reflection, works of compassion. We give up

luxuries like sugar or meat that might distract us from what's important. But the intention is not to remove us from reality or the worldly but to deepen our experience of it. Spiritual practices help us do what Jesus does, which is to be truly present—to God and to each other.

Many of you have participated in the creation of this year's book of Lenten reflections. Here we have personal reflections on scripture and on faith, one for every day of Lent. This book is one way in which we engage with people living out the faith together. It is a way that we are present to each other during Lent.

While we count down the passing of these forty days, we journey the road to Golgotha and march through time towards Good Friday. Lent is a time of drawing closer to God, just as in Christ God draws closer to us. It is a time that we discover and rediscover that Christ is present. God is with us. Here in this worship. On these streets. Here in these people. Here at this table. In the bread and wine, the stuff of ordinary life, Christ is with us. And to that, I say, "We worship an awesome and mysterious God!" Amen.

Works Consulted

The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume VIII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.