

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Tempted in the Wilderness”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 1, 2020

Romans 5:12-19

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

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.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit . I pray that you would take the words that we've heard read from scripture. The words we'd offered in song and in prayer. The words that each of us carry within us this morning, and the words that you've laid upon my heart to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these words, and by the power of your spirit change them into the word of Jesus Christ. The word of life and hope and peace and love and forgiveness for all of us. And let that word dwell within us, so deeply and so strongly that we might share it with those we meet in the week ahead. I ask this to the faithful name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

So as we begin the season of lent, most of us know that this is a time of preparation in anticipation of Easter. Like Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness, we spend 40 days in the season of lent examining our lives, and thinking about those places where maybe our faith hasn't been that strong. We consider our sins, we pray about forgiveness, but all of it's leading up to that moment when we celebrate on Easter Sunday. And temptation normally kicks off the season of Lent, this particular passage where Jesus, before he even begins his public ministry, is led out by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Now, I don't know

about you, but there have been many times when I thought about temptation, those that I have faced and I think, "Wow, I wish I had that word right there in the front of my mind, or on my tongue that I could say to either that person or to myself that would just stop them dead in their tracks." And when you come to think about Jesus responding to temptation it seems that Jesus has those words right there. When the devil, or the tempter as it says, asks a starving Jesus, "Hey, why don't you turn these stones into food?", Jesus has the word and BOOM, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." I wish I had that kind of faith. I'm guessing some of you wish you had that kind of faith, too.

But I was surprised to learn this week that Jesus didn't just have those words right there. They're not coming straight from his heart, they're coming from scripture. Most of them from Deuteronomy in the eighth chapter. Jesus is facing all of these temptations, and basically he's quoting scripture back to the devil. This is why in the second temptation, the devil says to Jesus, "Well, it's written. He will command as angels concerning you." And etc. It's because he recognizes that Jesus is offering scripture, and so the temptation comes in the form of scripture. Jesus doesn't just come up with these responses standing there. It's not his faith that's making them jump out and get on his tongue and be spoken. It's because he knows scripture. And the first quote that he offers when the temptation is turning the stone into a loaf of bread, comes from Deuteronomy 8:2-3. "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart whether or not you would keep God's commandments. God humbled you by letting you hunger then by feeding you with mana with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." So when Jesus faces that first temptation, he quotes scripture back to the devil. He cites the passage that talks about the exodus and God leading the people out of bondage and their experience in the wilderness being hungry and concerned about food and He just lays it down because He knows that story. The last temptation, the third one, He says, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him." Again, He's quoting from Deuteronomy 8:19. "If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish." Rather than doing it in the negative of Deuteronomy, He switches it to a positive statement. But again, He's quoting scripture to the tempter. He's not just fabricating these answers on His own. And so I was wondering what might we learn or do if we're tempted and we try to model ourselves after the life of Christ? Can we quote scripture to some of the temptations that we face in today's world and in our lives?

I'm sure many of you have heard the word "coronavirus" in the last week or more. Covid-19, it's named. The new virus that's making its way around the world one patient at a time, infecting others. It's here. It's there. I've got friends who are in Israel that wanted to finish their vacation in Italy and guess what? They're coming home because no flights are flying them to Milan. The coronavirus is scaring everyone. Just look at the news or log on to Facebook and you'll find a story about how you should get surgical scrubs and masks and gloves, to get lots of disinfectant, to stay locked up in your house and make sure that you don't talk to anybody or breathe on them or touch them or eat with them and you'll be safe. In fact, there are over two million stories on Facebook that are being shared about the coronavirus that are patently false. And like a virus, these stories on Facebook are infecting everyone's imaginations. And so wondering about that, I went to the CDC website and kind of looked up some facts about what people die from. And it's projected right now that the death rate for the coronavirus will be around 3.4% which is a couple times higher than the common flu. It's not a million times higher or even a hundred times higher. It's three times higher. Maybe we don't need to be terrified because the news stories are always talking about the coronavirus and trying to hype up the panic. Maybe what we could do is instead respond by part of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul, he leads me on right paths for my namesake. Yay, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for God is with me, his rod and his staff protect me." We could quote that one verse of walking through the valley of the shadow of death whenever we see a story or feel afraid about this virus. We always live in the shadow of death. God is always with us. God is protecting us to the point of alleviating our fear and our worry. Let's just say that passage again and again and again.

Another temptation that makes its way into the life of the church and the community and the news is the issue of gun violence. At our last new member's class, the issue came up. Do you have a policy about active shooters? How do we prevent these sorts of incidents from happening here at church or anywhere else? You know what, something that's very important, we need to take measures. We need to put protocols in place. We need to have people doing recognition at the door. If they don't know the person, they don't let him in. I know, let's lock the door and give everyone a card, and that way, they can scan themselves in and out, we'd know who it is. I know, let's use video cameras and enhance our video surveillance so we can watch everybody. On and on the things go, all about gun violence and it's all about gun violence in the church. So again, I went to the CDC website and in 2018 learned that there were 236 deaths due to gun violence in a mass shooting event. 236. What I've never heard, when this issue was talked about, gun violence in any forum, is how significant suicides are when it comes to guns. In fact, suicides are the

number one killer when it comes to gun violence. 60% of every death that's due to a handgun or a gun is because of suicide. The number is 47,173, 236 mass shooting, over 47,000 because of suicide. So again, can we quote scripture when it comes to that situation of being afraid of what may or may not happen? We heard about it, sang about when we sang Psalm 32 today. "Many are the torments of the wicked but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice and shout for joy all you upright in heart." Do we need to be afraid or do we need to be more compassionate? Do our mental health resources need to be more readily available? Do we need to reach out to our friends who seem like they might be pulling back a little bit and check in with them, to see how they're doing? And can we do all of that, trusting that God's love is going with us? Again, a temptation to be swept away by worry and a response that can come from scripture.

The third temptation is a little bit different. It's a temptation that many of us have faced in one form or another. The particular remembrance that I have come from talking to a congregant who went to a Superbowl party this year. There is a lot of family gathered together. After church, they're having a big meal and getting ready to watch the Superbowl, and one of the relatives said, "I wish more people in Miami would stand up during the game and hold up a sign that read "John 3:16". "For God so love the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That one passage that gets lifted up and celebrated. And the conversation that I had with the congregant was, "David, I wish I had had a better response." Because it is in the scriptures, it's in John and it says, just like my cousin said, that you have to believe in Jesus to be okay. I said, "Yes. It says that. It is in John 3:16." But what I learned this week is if we, like our evangelical cousins or family members or friends were literalist and took the Bible as the literal word of God, we have a response. And our response could come from the reading from Romans, the fifth chapter, just one verse and only part of it. Verse 18, the second part, "So one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and love for all." Not all who believe, not all who believe like me, not all who attend my church, not all who read my Bible, but all. One man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. So again, when we face that temptation of struggling with a response to a relative or a family member or a friend, we can quote scripture just like Jesus quoted scripture. My invitation for us this week, as we think about Lent and think about everything out there that's trying to get us distracted or worried or afraid is to calmly and reliably come back to scripture. Come back to this 23rd Psalm. Come back to the 32nd Psalm. Come back to Romans. Come back to what Jesus says. Worship the Lord, your God, and serve only him. That's not bad advice no matter what temptation you face. Amen.