

Sermon “Distractions and Connections”
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
March 6, 2022
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Luke 4: 1-13

The Temptation of Jesus

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’

Then the devil led him 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 only him.” ’

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,
“He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you”, and
“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Sermon: Distractions and Connections

Can you imagine any better way to start of Journey than to hear God telling you that you are beloved, seeing the Spirit, and letting the Spirit lead you? I can't think of a better way to begin anything.

I think when we hear this Bible passage, we focus on the exchange between Jesus and the devil. Now, I am not saying that the exchange is insignificant. It is really important. It's part of our focus during Lent. And we will get to that. But I think sometimes we overlook this beginning of this reading.

Just prior to this reading, Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist. The Spirit had descended on him as he prayed and God's voice called him "Beloved." And as Jesus went into the wilderness, he was not only filled with the Spirit. He was led by the Spirit into that wilderness. The Spirit was with Jesus, in Jesus, and leading the way. Jesus was never alone.

In his wilderness time, Jesus was tempted. The devil first tempted Jesus with bread. Now Jesus knew we need more than bread. Now Jesus did not mean that we can survive without bread. Jesus fed thousands of people. But Jesus also understood that we have a hunger or thirst or need for something more than food that feeds the body. We hunger and thirst for those essentials that feed the heart and soul - love, relationship, meaning. But sometime we hunger and thirst for what separates us from God.

Our devotional for this Lent, "A Good Enough Lent: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection," by Kate Bowler, one of the devotions is entitled, "Shiny Things." That devotional speaks to idolatry. She explains idols. She references that the Israelites created a golden calf

when Moses was delayed on the mountain with Yahweh. They created an idol. They created an image made with their own hands to worship.

She explains that we as Christians sometimes do the same things. We make idols. She quotes Martin Luther, who said “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.” She also compares an idol to a flowering weed. It looks pretty and spreads as it grows. But it is not the garden. And it can take over the garden, choking out the other plants that we are trying to grow.

She asks, “What is idolatry except beautiful things that do not transform us?” She invites us to ask ourselves, what is it that our life points to? She offers these words that invite us into self-reflection.

She calls it, *“A Blessing for Letting Go of the Things that Shine*

*Blessed are we, when the heart shudders to ask, is it me, Lord? Am I the one who has chosen to follow a proxy? What does my life point to? When I look at the decisions I make and the ways I spend my time and my money, what is it that I love? What does the evidence tell me about the cause that I care for the most?”**

When Jesus was tempted by the devil, he knew that we do not live by just bread. Looking at what we choose for nourishment for our lives, can be part of our self-reflection during Lent.

After the initial temptation, the devil tried to tempt Jesus with power. Jesus also understood about power, that power is has its challenges. Now we can all think of instances when individuals have abused power. But that’s an extreme example. When we receive, take, or accept power, we run the risk of thinking we are important, that we are better than others, that we are self-sufficient and we have earned what we have received. Our attitude is not one of humility.

In Kate Bowler's devotion, "Small Things, Great Love." Kate give an example of small but humble act of love. She speaks of Adeline, the organist in her small Mennonite Church. Adeline was always there, leading the small congregation in music and song for years and years, as long as anyone could remember. Then her husband of fifty one years died suddenly. The people expected to struggle through worship that Sunday, who would lead them in music and song. But Adeline arrived. When she was asked why she was there, "She paused, as if confused by the question. 'I was on the calendar' "That was her response. It was a small act, done in great love.*

In response to the devils final temptation, Jesus reminded us not to test our God. We may ask God not to subject us to struggles so we are not bashing our feet against the stone as we walk our journeys. But when we trip and fall, there is a tendency to look only at the pain or the struggle and become angry at God. Or we might deny God's existence because we think God was absent and did not protect us. God can take our anger. But I believe that, in prayer, with faith we can see beyond the struggle, we can trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and we can have hope.

As we begin our Lenten journeys, in the back of the church, I have set up some stations in the sanctuary. On those stations are items for your Lenten journeys, our journeys. They are meant to be reminders for your journeys. You are invited to take one or two items to reflect upon, one that speaks to you. They will remain in the sanctuary over the coming weeks.

They are as follows:

There are pieces of foil - shiney things to take if you choose to reflect on something that you have made into an idol, something that interferes with your relationship with God.

Similarly, there's a "To Do..."list page. Does your "To Do..." list interfere with taking time for God?

There are stones for you to take if you want to reflect on things that weigh you down, that you can't get out of your head, and prevent your thoughts from turning to God. Is there a stone you need to roll away this Lent?

While we reflect on things that separate us from God during Lent, I think it's only fair that we recall that the Spirit is with you in this time.

There are sticky notes for you to write something on that reminds you that God is with you. It can be as simple as "God Loves Me" or perhaps a favorite scripture verse. Then I invite you to place it where you see it each day – on a mirror, a kitchen cabinet, or your computer screen. It's your choice.

There's embroidery floss, that I'm thinking of as string. People used to tie string around their fingers so they did not forget something. You are welcome to tie a string around your finger or around something that you see regularly, to remind you that God is with you on your journey.

And there are buttons. We use buttons to hold our clothing together, to keep parts close together. I invite you to take a button to remind you of God's closeness. Place it somewhere you can see it or you can put it in your pocket and when you put your hand there, it will remind you of God's closeness or that God holds you near and can hold you together. It helps when you feel like things are falling apart.

As we enter this Lenten prayer and reflection, may we deepen our relationship with our God. May we believe that our attempts please God. Even if we stray from our path, God's grace is new to us each and every day. And may we trust that entering this time of reflection

with the desire to become closer to God is truly good enough for the One who loves us unconditionally.

I invite you to take a few moments to go to the back of the church and take a look at those items. I invite you to take one or more. Of if you'd rather you may think about it now and take something after worship. It's up to you if you want to wait or go back now. There's also pages on the shelves to remind you of what these items represent.

(People go to look at and take items.)

Devotion examples taken from "A Good Enough Lent: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection," by Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. New York: Convergent Books. 2022.