

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

February 21, 2010

Rev. Roger Rapp

Worship Theme: Tempted and Tested

Luke 4:1-3

While at the hospital last Wednesday, I picked up a copy of USA Today, which is titled "The Nation's Newspaper". Since it was Ash Wednesday, which for Christians is the beginning of the Lenten season, perhaps there was some notation of that fact in a paper that presumably represents the whole nation. Just as I suspected, there was no mention of Ash Wednesday, or for that matter, the Lenten season. There was one article the "Life" section that was titled, "Young adults today are a 'less religious' bunch." That was it.

Maybe that's OK. Lent is one season, unlike Christmas and Easter, that have been exploited by our secular world. We are free to keep the season to ourselves.

So we come once again, to the season of Lent, the season of ashes, fasting, prayer, and works of love. We often associate this season with reminders of how sinful and depraved we are, how we should feel guilty, and how God saves and rescues us from our sins. Presbyterian theologian Walter Brueggemann argues that lamentation is a better way to describe sin; sin being not so much what we do as it is our fundamental separation

from God, our creator. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, we do not need any reminders of our sinfulness. We know that our lives are not what we would like them to be. We know that our hopes, our dreams, and our aspirations are often not realized. We know that we often are tempted to doubt our deepest beliefs and values. We know that what we believe and what we stand for is often tested in the trials and trauma of life. We know that our faith is not only tested at times, but on top of that we find ourselves tempted as well.

Plus, in today's times, which some have identified as the "post Christian" era, it is a challenge to sustain and maintain our faith in a world that is cluttered with too much information and too little credibility.

Yet even though Lent is the same each year, and our lives are still our lives, we are at a different point on our baptismal journey. So we are the same, yet a little different. We change, but God's word never changes. And God's word has the capacity to reach us at each and every stage of our lives.

Some of you may remember last Sunday was the Sunday of the Transfiguration of our Lord. It recalls that moment when Jesus and some of his closest followers were on the mountain....in a dazzling display of God's presence, a glimpse of the divinity of Jesus was displayed. The heavens opened and a voice proclaimed Jesus as the very Son of God and that the world was to pay attention, to listen to him. That story occurs in Chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel. Today's reading comes from earlier in the life of Jesus. We know it as the story of the temptations of Jesus, when he was led into the wilderness to be tempted and tested.

But I would point out that before the temptation stories, we have the event of the baptism of Jesus, in Chapter 3. Here, as in the

Transfiguration, the voice comes again from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Luke 3:22.

The point is that the testing and tempting of Jesus, as well as our times of testing and temptation, happens to us in the context of our baptism. Before Jesus does anything in his public ministry, he decides to be baptized. God’s claim of his Son in his Baptism marks him as a beloved person, cherished by God. Jesus was not here by accident. And none of us here gathered here are in this world by mistake. We all have a place in God’s divine plan. All we have to do is trust in God and in the promises that God made to us when we were baptized.

So, we come to the temptation stories. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, is led by that same Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted and tested.

We know how it ends, of course. Jesus resists the temptations of the Devil. Of course, there is the caveat at the end of the lesson, which is good to remember. “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Luke 4:13. In other words, as long as Jesus was on this side of eternity, he would always have to put up with the devil, especially in his moments of weakness. In the same way, the moments in our lives when we are tested and tempted will come throughout all of our days. We learn from our mistakes. Then we have to learn again from our mistakes. As the old German cliché has it: “We get too soon old and too late geschmart!”

Jesus, the Son of God, does not begin his earthly ministry with a show of glory or power. Instead, Jesus begins his ministry alone....in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil. While the wilderness is no place

for a king, it is to this barren and godforsaken place that the Spirit leads Jesus. Luke is a little gentler in his gospel, where Jesus is “led” into the wilderness. In Mark, who is more blunt and to the point, Jesus is “driven” into the wilderness. But even in the wilderness, the words God spoke at his baptism are still ringing in his ears. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In our baptism, we also are carried into our times when we are tempted and tested with the promises of God ringing in our ears. As Jesus was lured by the devil’s offer of bread, we are lured by the offer of wealth and possessions. As Jesus was tempted by the offer of power over all the kingdoms of the world, we are tempted by the false security that power over others brings us. The devil tells Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, assuring Jesus that God will protect him. We often make deals with God, if only God will give us health, intimacy with another, or a good grade on our math test.

Like Jesus, we are not led into places of glory after our baptism but into the wild places of the world where we are called to live our lives as members of the body of Christ. The good news is that we do not face our temptations and testing alone. We are not alone, just as Jesus was not entirely alone in his time in the wilderness. That theme is especially proclaimed in the hymn “You Who Dwell in the Shelter of the Lord” that we will sing together in a few moments. We journey together, but most importantly, we are joined by the God who knows us by name, and who calls to us by name, a voice that we can hear in faith, even when other voices seek to deceive and destroy us.

One final note, and this may be the most important: Jesus was not tested and tempted to show us how to resist temptation. Jesus did not resist

temptation so that we could “imitate Christ” and resist successfully our times when we are tested and tempted. Hear this: Jesus defeated the devil because we will not. We will not resist temptation. We may not even remember our baptism. And if we were baptized as infants, we surely do not remember our baptism. And yet, we are saved from the power of evil. Because Jesus has already resisted temptation, because of God’s blessing that he carried in his Baptism, we too are remembered and blessed by our Creator, especially during those times when we are tested and tempted.

A final story in my life of testing and temptation. When I was a young boy, I noticed a very fine and appealing pocket knife at Yordy’s hardware store in my hometown. I knew it was wrong, but I yielded to temptation, and yet I slipped the knife into my back pocket. Just as I was about to escape through the front door (this was before the days of electronic warning systems), there was Orval Yordy standing there. He had a look of sadness and firmness on his face. “I know you have the knife, and here is my plan. You can pay me 50 cents a week until it is paid for.” I was speechless and embarrassed. Then, an added word of grace. “We will keep this between us. I won’t tell your mother.” Never was I so glad to repay that debt. Orval Yordy was also my scoutmaster. He did his part in helping me to honor the Scout oath. Many years later, I saw Orval in the crowd at our hometown’s Centennial. I was asked to preach at the community service as one of the local boys that went into the ministry. As I told the story, I looked out at Orval, now in his last years of life, and the smile on his face was a reward that I still cherish today.

Thanks be to God, who sends his angels to us when we are tempted and tested. Amen...and Amen.

