

Visions of Jesus for Our Time (II): Tried and True
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 4:1-13

It has been a great pleasure over the past weeks to rehearse the Verdi *Requiem* with our choir, in anticipation of today's presentation of it, with the combined Fairmount, First Baptist and Plymouth church choirs and orchestra under the direction of renowned conductor Robert Page. For an amateur like me, the *Requiem* is an extremely difficult work, and has demanded careful practice, and lots of it. Rehearsals with Robert Page keep you on full alert as he works with fierce passion to correct flaws, bring out the very best within us, and produce glorious music. It struck me that the season of Lent can function similarly for Christians. These forty days can be a concentrated time of "facing the music"—of learning more about who we are and who God is. We consciously put ourselves under the direction of the divine maestro. We "practice" the tasks to which we are called as Christians: loving, forgiving, serving—not easy things. And we learn how following the master will bring forth the very best within us, to make this world ring with the harmonies of justice, reconciliation, and peace.

The sermon series for Lent invites our consideration of the Maestro. In *Visions of Jesus for Our Time*, we will think about who is conducting the music of our lives, individually and as a church. What do we mean when we call Jesus "our Lord and Savior"? What is his central message? In what ways does he judge us—and to what effect? How do we distinguish between the Jesus of scripture and the Jesus espoused by those who hijack his message for their own social or political agenda? Each of these questions has been prompted by conversations I've had over the past months with members and friends who take faith seriously, yet have questions, particularly about Jesus and his role in that faith.

We begin today in the wilderness of temptation. After Jesus' baptism, but before his preaching ministry begins, he spends time alone in the desert, praying and fasting. As his sense that the carpenter shop was not his destiny grew, perhaps he wanted discernment on how to proceed. It was the first, but certainly not the last, time that Jesus sought the clarifying quiet of the wilderness—and the devil an opportune time to come knocking. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel of Luke, in the fourth chapter at the first verse. [LUKE 4:1-13]

When was the last time you had an encounter with the Tempter? I've asked myself that question a hundred times this past week, and come up with a short, fairly benign list consisting mainly of desserts made of chocolate. Nothing at all approaching the drama of Jesus being confronted by the devil in the wilderness. With Jesus facing down the devil's offerings of power, fame, and popularity, you get the feeling there's more at stake than ...cheesecake.

For better or worse, the temptations of the greatest consequence you and I face seem not to be presented as clearly as the ones Jesus resisted in our text. Instead, they sneak in, hovering at the edges, moving closer, undetected because of the pace and volume of our lives. Hardly ever except in hindsight can we identify a moment, one particular decision that took us over to the dark side. More often than not, we wake up one morning and wonder how things got like this....when did life get so crazy?....how did this happen?who noticed the signs until it all fell apart?

Maybe we don't experience the clarity of Jesus' experience because it only presents itself that way to persons who are spiritually attuned, those who are not unfamiliar with the rugged terrain of their own soul and the awareness of God's presence in it. The Buddhist tradition calls it "living mindfully"—being aware of the rich possibilities in every moment, every step, every intaken breath. We don't cultivate

“wilderness” in contemporary life very much. Deprivation is unknown to us in a super-sized culture which relies instead on cultivating appetite and providing things to fulfill it. When one of you suggested that the period of silence following the prayer of confession be extended, I made a joke—oh, because you have so much to confess?? She responded with a smile but with utter seriousness, no, because I don’t have time even to think of what I need to confess in those few seconds. Christian author Tony Campolo expressed a similar need when he commented, “Instead of praying ‘if I should die before I wake,’ we should pray ‘Lord, wake me up before I die.’”

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where the temptations he faced awakened him to his true destiny. Notice how the temptations were not inherently wrong or evil. It’s good to seek food when hungry. It’s good to have the power to bring about change. It’s good to be protected from threat and danger. But the Tempter doesn’t always use EVIL to thwart God’s intent; often we find ourselves tempted by something GOOD used in the service of evil.

In Nikos Kazantzakis book, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Martin Scorsese’s film based on it, Jesus has a vision of what his life could be if he is not crucified. He could live a “normal” life—marry, raise children, and grow old in the comfort of a family. Though obviously a work of fiction, the struggle of Jesus to discover who he was and to choose his true vocation, made it more compelling than the Jesus of our text, calmly countering each challenge with a Bible verse and what appears to be absolute unwavering faith.

Kazantzaki’s imaginative portrayal helped me see that there really is no divide between Jesus’ temptation and ours. Our first, last, and greatest temptation is to be something other than who we are so wonderfully created to be. Beloved children of God, created in God’s own image, called to love and serve. Yet we are always being distracted from that sacred identity and holy purpose. We are always, well, tempted like Jesus, to give up primary allegiance to God. Our need for

bread, for power, for protection is secondary to our need for trust in God alone, who provides them all.

In the wilderness, Jesus resisted the temptation to worship another god. In the wilderness, Jesus became aware in new and clearer ways what God was calling him to do and become. Is it surprising then, that Jesus goes out from the wilderness, the Bible tells us, “filled with the power of the Spirit,” focused and passionate?

I can think of no greater need for us right now than to be led into the wilderness of testing. We are good people, but we’re exhausted; our energies have been spent in pursuit of the good life, the best life, but we seem to come up short; we never feel caught up. We can’t seem to make some of the most important things fit into our lives: worship, prayer, play; I read not long ago that many couples are too tired even to make love! We’re overdue, friends, for a spiritual tune-up, or even a complete overhaul.

And Jesus can be our wilderness guide, leading us in so that we may gain clarity and insight; remaining with us through every one of life’s challenges, and giving us courage and stamina to resist the all-to-easy slide into self-absorption and idolatry. But he will only be a compelling guide if we understand that he was like us, he was one of us. Jesus experienced doubt, desire, anger. He was not removed from humanity; he was fully part of it. However, he allowed the divine reality in him to forgive, heal, and redirect the human bent toward self-preoccupation. While exercising human freedom, he disciplined his mind and heart to follow the wisdom of his inner Spirit. He became the way, the truth and the life for others because people found in him the pattern of integration needed for their own wholeness.

In *The Last Temptation of Christ* Kazantzakis has Jesus wrestling with his identity and mission right up to the moment of his death. Standing down the temptation means staying up

on the cross. Choosing to do results in a moment of utter clarity and finally, fulfillment.

A wild, indomitable joy took possession of him.

No, no, he was not a coward, a deserter, a traitor. No, he was still nailed to the cross. He had stood his ground to the very end; he had kept his word. All the other images were illusions sent by the Devil. His disciples were alive and thriving. They had gone over land and sea and were proclaiming the Good News. Everything had turned out as it should, glory be to God! He uttered a triumphant cry: It is accomplished! And it was as though he had said: Everything has begun.

[Kazantzakis, p. 496]

Friends, the accomplishment of Jesus' mission is the beginning of ours—yours and mine. Because like Jesus, we will always be tempted, so we do well to stick close to him. As the writer of Hebrews notes with some relief, *we don't have an intercessor who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Let us choose Jesus as the one we will follow and serve. Not because we accept some theological tenet about him, but because in him we have discovered true life and a good way to go.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH AND IN CHRIST JESUS TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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