

Sunday, February 25, 2007

Luke 4:1-13

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.

Since this is the Sunday of our Annual Meeting, we usually like to keep the sermon short and leave plenty of time for discussion of issues in the life of the church. This is also the first Sunday in Lent, and so we are presented with one of the more dramatic stories in the life of Jesus, the temptation in the wilderness:

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.

How exactly do we deal with this story and what is its relevance to the issues that face us personally and as a church in 2007?

One temptation is to treat this story as a cautionary tale for each of us – to draw out what is universal about the experience Jesus had in the wilderness and dilute and domesticate it so it really becomes a story about the human condition, about us, about our lives and the temptations we all must face. But this morning I want to resist that temptation. I want to follow the advice of a commentator who wrote:

The story of the temptation in the wilderness should be considered in light of who Jesus is, what he is called to do, and how he fulfills his call. The passage, in other words, is about Jesus. Luke invites us to contemplate Jesus. The passage is not a formula for resisting temptation; it is an invitation to consider Jesus, who resisted temptation for us and went on to win our redemption.

So, let's consider the temptation in the wilderness as revelation about Jesus rather than a relevant object lesson for us. Revelation does not have to be relevant – revelation does not have to connect us to lessons for living the good life; it does not have to deal in techniques for problem solving or coping; revelation does not have to be timely, current, clear, or productive. Revelation is not judged by its usefulness, only by its truthfulness.

Revelation changes the ground under our feet; revelation is a wake up call about who God is, who we are, and what is the real foundation of our lives.

So, consider the story of the temptation in the wilderness as a story that makes Jesus unique – a story about him, about God, about what God is doing in him. And consider this sermon as a starting point for a Lenten practice – the practice of looking at the stories in the Bible which reveal the Lordship of Jesus Christ and make us realize why Jesus the leader and we are the followers.

There is a litany that we use every Remembrance Sunday – fall and spring – which begins ends with the words:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Lent is a good time to remember that we come to church to look to Jesus because Jesus is Lord. We gather in this fellowship because God invites us in; we are not the initiators, we are responding to God's call. We are not pioneers or innovators, we are not looking for the next new thing, we are followers – we follow the Lord who makes all things new.

One of the earliest sermons recorded in the Bible is in the fourth chapter of Acts, where Peter and John are called before the Council in Jerusalem and asked to explain the power in their healing and teaching. Peter says to them:

“Rulers of the people, this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’

There it is – the core of the revelation that comes through the whole testimony of scripture: Jesus is

The stone that the builders rejected which has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. Psalm 118:22-23

As we live through the days of lent, as we meet in our 291st annual meeting, we want to keep that revelation at the center. It has its own power – just open your life to it - look to the Lord, witness his life, hear his words, and say “yes” to his call to follow.