

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for the Communion Service, First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 30:15-18 and Luke 4:1-13

CHOOSING THE WAY

In past sermons for the First Sunday in Lent, I have looked at Jesus' temptations for their correspondence to our own. The Letter to the Hebrews says he "was tempted (or "tested") in every way we are, but without sin." Our own temptations are less than his in magnitude because our callings to serve God are the lesser by far, but the nature of temptation was the same for him as for us. I hold to that understanding because the more we make Jesus different from us, the farther we push him from our lives. The more we isolate him as exceptional, the less we need to concern ourselves with making his way now our way, also. Jesus then becomes the one who did everything for us so we do not have to change very much at all, make many hard choices, give up our old ways, or keep growing. Salvation then becomes a done deal that will pay off with heaven when we die, rather than an ongoing process of life-saving, life-giving change restoring us to God, each other, and our rightful selves.

But this morning I ask you to think with me about his temptations as specifically related to the type of Christ, of Messiah, Jesus was called by God to be and made choices to become. It matters very much for us what kind of Christ Jesus became for our sake and for the salvation of this world. If we are going to follow him in his way, we need to know what his way was and is and ever shall be. People like to define a Christ for themselves, as they fancy, and then name him Jesus. It's confusing because there seem to be so many different Christs, all called Jesus. Today, a person may choose the Christ that suits. One may choose a Christ whose message is hate, a Christ who loves but only one particular race of people, a Christ who despises this world and can't wait to burn it to a cinder, or a Christ who is so wishy-washy that he is offended by nothing as long as everybody talks sweetly. We have Christ the humble servant whose way is self-giving love, and Christ the Caesar of all Caesars who personifies power and dominion to sanctify the power of those who exercise dominion over others in his name. People ask, "How do I find a church that is right for me?" Maybe the real question is how to find the Christ among the many Christs being proclaimed.

Jesus' first temptation is to turn stones into bread. He's hungry; he needs food. If he's special, why should he have to find food the way everyone else does? I think this temptation is not only to self-serving but also to exceptionalism. Jesus will, after all, have to get food and soon. True, he rejects the temptation to make his own appetites his primary

concern. He will not use God to satisfy his own needs and desires rather than seek God's will. Jesus will make that choice again and again, most painfully in Gethsemane when he prays in mortal agony, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." But I think we need to see also that Jesus refuses to regard himself as exceptional among human beings. As he will not use God for his own purposes, neither will he step away from us in refusal to share our common lot in life. Exceptionalism blocks empathy and so leads to indifference toward the common types, the ordinary people with their run-of-the-mill problems. The exceptional do not wait in line with the rest of us, don't buy off the rack, don't pay the taxes the rest of us must, and sometimes can't even be bothered with obeying the law. They move to the front, enter by the private door, take red-carpet treatment for granted. "Don't you know who I am?" Jesus chose not to set himself apart from the rest of us. He gave himself to empathy with those who suffered, and he let himself be moved by compassion for people no one exceptional noticed at all. Therefore, those who considered themselves exceptional detested him.

If we take the imagery of second temptation literally, it makes no sense. How would Jesus be even the slightest bit tempted to worship the devil if doing so meant literally bowing before the satanic figure? It starts to make sense when we realize the devil is in the temptation to want dominion over the kingdoms of the world. The temptation for God's Messiah is to do great good with power. That is the world's way, and it is the devil's way. Rise to power, eliminate your enemies, and dominate the people for the greater good. Be the Christ of power and glory. Rule the nations. Impose what you decide is God's will upon people – for their own good, of course. How much of church history reveals the extent to which Christians chose this false Christ of power and glory! And how much evil was done! Jesus refused to be that false Christ. We have a saying for it: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Jesus refuses to be corrupted by power. If only his church would do the same. He will, instead, take the way of compassion and humble service, though that way leads to the cross.

There is a movement within American Christianity to change Jesus, transforming him from who he was into this very type of Christ he refused to become: the Christ of power and dominion, the Christ of the "greater good" who crushes his enemies and damns people who will not follow what this movement claims are his dictates. That movement would mislead us back into the way of the world, the worship of power and prestige, and it would make us cruel and heartless, ready to condemn people and fully prepared to rejoice over their damnation. Jesus was not, is not, and never will be that kind of Christ.

The third and final temptation in Luke's account is the religious one. *So, Jesus, you trust God, do you? Prove it. Show your faith. Demonstrate it.* This temptation is really no more than a religious twist on the first two. *Show how exceptional you are, and win a*

following at the same time. Impress people with your faith. No, Jesus will not take the lead and expect God to tag along behind him. But think of the doubts that might arise in his mind. How can he accomplish God's purpose if only a handful of people ever hear of him? How can being the Christ, the Messiah, matter if it stays un-spectacular? Sure, we know he promises to be with even just two or three people gathered in his name, but wouldn't it be better if he had a really powerful public relations campaign? Don't you have to get people's attention first, make a name for yourself, and gather a lot of fans? The church is not the Jesus Fan Club. The church is a gathering of people who put their trust in him or at least try to, and then do what they can in humble faith to serve his redeeming love for this world, believing that a tiny bit of leaven will, in God's own time and way, work itself through the whole batch of bread.

Jesus does not call us to be spectacular. He refused to make a spectacle of his faith. I suspect that Christianity overall is hurt more than helped by its spectacular people, its super stars that draw the crowds.

As we move toward the sacrament in which we hold in our hands and receive into our bodies the elemental symbols of that redemptive love which happened for us and our salvation in Jesus' suffering, humiliation, and death, let us realize that we too make choices and that our choices matter. Salvation is not a contract, deal closed and sealed until we die, then opened to reveal our eternal destiny. Salvation is an ongoing process of healing and restoration, first of all to God and then to each other and to our selves. I suggest we consider during this Lenten season that among our many choices for or against Jesus and his way of life is the basic choice of which Christ we will trust, look to, serve, and follow.

The more Jesus is falsified, the more also his name is mocked throughout society. When hatred and racism are stamped with his name, then those who reject hatred and racism reject him also. When scorn for women as second-class human beings put on earth only to breed and please men becomes associated with Jesus, who himself rejected that whole oppressive view of women, then surely young women (and not-so-young) must be expected to resent him and reject him as the Christ. People who are hated in his name are not likely to embrace him, are they?

Let us, as we seek spiritual depth for ourselves, consider starting with the question of who our Christ is, that we call Jesus. The First Letter of John makes us a promise: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." We do well, I think, to seek in our own lives and our shared life as a church to be moving in the right direction, toward the Christ Jesus really was and is. Amen.