

LENT II – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.
Amen.

Last week we heard the story of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, a story that is repeated every single year on the first Sunday in Lent. Luke ends the story with an ominous statement: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. We don’t see the Tempter/Devil again, but there are moments when each of these temptations rises up in Jesus again.

I think it is critical to our understanding of Jesus the man, particularly the man of faith, to look at what temptation meant to him. For most of the history of the church since Jesus’ time, we have wrestled with understanding just who he was and what he knew when. All but one of the early heresies about him that I can think of glossed over his humanity in favor of his divinity, so much so that it is hard to believe that Jesus ever really suffered. If he was only divine, he may have had some heart pangs about the suffering of others, but it would not have grabbed his very soul, it would not have brought him to tears, as at the death of his dear friend Lazarus, or to anguish, as we hear Jesus lamenting in the passage today. This part of his story comes many months after his baptism and temptation, at a time when he has been and is engaging folks with his teaching, offering them healing and even casting out the demons and devils and obsessions and addictions which possess them. Lest you think Jesus floated through life in a God-made protective bubble that shielded him from the pain and suffering of others, today we see his heart open and raw, pouring out his pain at their pain, longing to do something about it, to save them.

Listen again to the depth and power of Jesus' lament: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones all those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

This is the pastor's heart on full view for us, the heart that reveals to us how very tempting it must have been for Jesus to be offered all the kingdoms of the world if only he would worship the devil.

Jesus could save them from suffering, if he took it all on himself.

But Jesus saw something much deeper. Salvation was the dynamic he was being asked to be a part of by God his Father. He was being asked to be the savior of humankind, and it would cost Jesus his life, though he only glimpsed how that might be, with it getting clearer day by day.

But saving humanity from physical pain and death was not the saving that God had in mind. God was asking Jesus to save our souls, not our bodies, from death, from the death of giving up, giving in, surrendering to negativity and defeat and, most of all, despair.

There is a line in the Great Litany that hints at this: "Deliver us from dying suddenly and unprepared." Dying suddenly, as in a tragic accident, with no last conversations in which to receive and offer forgiveness, to have love restored with those who have been dear to us, or, as with COVID, to die with the comforting care of a nurse but with no chance of reconciliation with those who have been closest to us and from whom we may now be estranged. That is to risk dying without hope in our hearts, with no sense of a gentle release into another life. Dying suddenly and unprepared may leave us with matters that bind us to this life with unfinished business, with love unrestored. I cannot say how we may be bound when we die and have to trust God to free us from any ties to this earth at our death.

But I have seen many times how often people are still bound up in a relationship with someone who has died, having no possibility for the conversation that may release them. A good spiritual director or counselor can help greatly with this, but the greatest release is hearing the words of forgiveness and love from the mouth of the one who is dear to us.

I knew where I wanted to begin this sermon, but I did not know where it would take me, and I want to stay with this theme of death and dying, particularly the death of our souls.

I had a conversation with a dear friend this week who said she is in a depression. I knew it was true when she said that she simply did not want to do anything for anyone else, did not want to go out and about, did not even want to do anything good for herself. That's a pretty clear sign of depression and since I know what has been going on in her life, I can understand why. For at least the past 18 months she has put much of herself on hold, to be there for a husband who has had multiple hospitalizations and also a close friend with a very similar degree of health issues. The friend died a few weeks ago, and her husband is having a new surge of strength and energy. So, much of her time and energy has been freed up and she started thinking of herself. Her mother died of Alzheimer's disease some years ago, and my friend has spent countless time consulting doctors and the internet about the illness and its progression. She is a psychologist, so she knows a lot at this point, and she lives with a very strong fear of Alzheimer's imminent control over her life. Now that she has time to think about herself again, her predominant feelings are fear and dread of the future.

I know what it is to be depressed, and have experienced it a few times in my life, once very profoundly some years ago. I know what it feels like. It feels like getting lost in oneself, of being in a tomb, of going

around and around in circles of “what’s the use?” thinking. I liken it to being like Lazarus in his tomb. Oh, we are not physically dead like he was, but at a time like that we are cut off from hope for a future. That is the death Jesus came to save us from.

Lazarus heard Jesus calling him out of that tomb, and I think God can call us out of depression—and here I am talking more about situational depression rather than chronic depression. I am talking about the kind of depression that follows the death of a loved one, the loss of a body part or an ability that we thrived on in the past, the loss of a relationship due to death or anger or some other separation. I am talking about the kind of depression that we all have a taste of in this excruciatingly long quarantine and other limitations due to COVID, which this week will pass two full years. That is a long time to put a great deal of our lives on the shelf. The memory of how to live freely fades.

For a time, such a depression can be as intense as chronic depression, and while medication may diminish our fearfulness or anxiety, it does not always lift our spirits. We have to come out of ourselves. For me that happened when I was caught up by the absurdity of an ultra-serious actor singing absolute drivel on an opera stage. I went into a belly laugh, the first in many, many months, and a belly laugh is one where we lose control, we are caught up in something and don’t know where we are going, and we forget—if only for 10-15 whole seconds—we forget about what has been consuming us. For that short space of time, we are free! We have a new chance at life, and hope hangs in the balance. We have the opportunity to grab onto that hope and let it pull us up out of the hell we have been in. The opportunity is instantaneous; the healing takes longer; it takes place in time and over time. During that time, we are called to notice more and more of the grace and wonder around us.

For me the agent of grace was the new puppy I got, and the sheer delight of watching him on our walks as he was strengthened and experienced greater and greater motor development. Of course, he had boundless curiosity and delight in what he was discovering. He continuously focused my attention beyond myself and one day I noticed that the depression had lifted.

Right now, given COVID and the horror and devastation of a new war, many people are in depression at the same time. Our reaction to pain and suffering is withdrawal. We shut off the news in order to shut off our tears. Of course, then we also miss the stories of faith and courage and hope and heroic behavior, stories that also move us to tears, but the tears of cleansing and release and relief—tears that flow with hope.

Let's come back to Jesus, the man whose own faith, his own trust in God, his own gracious and gift-giving life saved so many from the demons that lived in them, saved so many from the death of their souls. Which of those stories comes most alive for you? And what other stories have you heard from others, or have you seen in others that reveal that same reality of salvation? This is a time to dwell in them, and to ponder as you sit and gaze at the beauty of nature or walk into each new breeze that comes your way, each time listening for the call, the call to you to come out of yourself.

When the great 20th Century German theologian Karl Barth was on his deathbed, someone asked him what was the most important theological thought he ever learned. Without hesitation, he said, "It was one that I learned in Sunday School as a child: 'Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.'"

How would you answer that? What is the most "amazing grace" in your life? *Amen.*

+JLJ