

March 10, 2019
First Sunday in Lent

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Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Luke 4:1-13

Even the Devil Can Quote Scripture

Jesus answered him, "It is written... [Then the devil] departed from him until an opportune time. – Luke 4:4,13



James Jacques Joseph Tissot "The Temptation in the Wilderness"

The psalm that Tim read for us is one of the most beloved in all of scripture. Mission coworkers in China during the Boxer Rebellion said that they could not have survived without its help and strength. Soldiers carry it with them into battle.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge ... no harm shall befall you. ... God will command the angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

There are other passages – Psalm 23, 100 and 121, Jeremiah 29:11:

For surely I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future of hope.

Why do people say they dislike the Old Testament? I don't understand. Some of these lines are over 3000 years old. Yet their wisdom shines for us, guiding us, like the beloved stories of Jesus.

Have you ever had the opportunity to share the Bible and the Christian faith with someone who has absolutely no knowledge of it? I have, but only a few times. It is an amazing opportunity.

There is a scene in Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad*, about the 1839 slave ship. In route from Sierra Leone, the Mende captives revolt, taking over the ship, but then are captured by the U.S. Navy off the coast of Long Island. Imprisoned in a strange country, they have no English skills, and no ability to defend themselves in a time when political division over abolition, and the possibility of civil war rage all around them.

Spielberg takes some liberties with history, but the heart of the film is powerful and true. During the struggle one of the Abolitionists gives the prisoners an illustrated English Bible. A man named Yamba spends hours studying the drawings, and slowly begins to understand the gospel story.

In a moment of utter despair, the leader of the group, whose name is Cinque, turns to Yamba and says "You don't have to pretend to be interested in that." Yamba replies, "I'm not pretending. I'm beginning to understand."

“Who is he?” Cinque asks.

“I don’t know, but everywhere he goes, he is followed by the sun,” Yamba says while pointing to the halo around his head. “Here he is healing people with his hands. Protecting them. . . Being given children. . .”

“What’s this?” asks Cinque pointing to a picture.

“He could also walk across the sea,” Yamba explains. “But then something happened. He was captured. Accused of some crime. Here he is with his hands tied.”

“He must have done something,” reasons Cinque.

“Why?” Yamba asks, “What did he do?”

Yamba continues, “Whatever it was, it was serious enough to kill him for it. Do you want to see how they killed him?”

“This is just a story, Yamba,” Cinque replies.

“But look, Yamba says. “That’s not the end of it. His people took his body down from this... thing... this... [Yamba makes the sign of the cross.] “They took him into a cave. They wrapped him in a cloth, like we do. They thought he died, but he appeared before his people again...and spoke to them. Then, finally, he rose into the sky. This is where the soul goes when you die here. This is where we’re going when they kill us. It doesn’t look so bad.”ⁱ

In a later scene Yamba holds the same Bible above his head as they wait for the verdict that will determine their whole future.

How did they know? How did Yamba and the others come to understand the story of Jesus? How did they discover the saving power of God in the midst of the unspeakable horrors of the slave trade?

The New Testament reading for today says that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus from the banks of the Jordan River where he was baptized, and sent out into the wilderness where he was mentally tortured and tempted by the devil for forty days. During *that* trial he came to understand his identity, God’s plan of salvation and his role in it. What happened? How did he know? There are many ways.

First there is what he saw at his baptism. In every one of the gospels the story of Jesus’ temptation follows immediately on the heels of his baptism -- when *the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. “And a voice came from heaven [saying] ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”*ⁱⁱ A second way he knew is what he heard John say when he came to the Jordan. ““*See, ’ said the Baptist, ‘here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’”*ⁱⁱⁱ

But long before Jesus saw and heard all of that, he read the Bible. He listened to the scriptures as they were read week after week in the synagogue. He worshipped with his family. He was a lector. Over time those sacred stories took root and grew in him, giving him self-awareness, a clarity of purpose and strength that enabled him to face his most bitter battle.

Here is Luke's account of that trial, Jesus' temptation. Listen now for God's word:

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 God.'"*

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.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What if there were a cure for temptation? Whoever discovers it will be richer than Jeff Bezos! We all know that we should consume less, save more, exercise every day, eat and do only what is good for our health and the health of the planet but, oh, the temptation!

A reporter once asked Tommy Lasorda, Major League pitcher, coach and manager, how his famous diet was going. "Not well." Lasorda said, "I'm a strong man, but linguini is stronger." Orson Wells, the immensely talented and often rotund Hollywood actor once said, "My doctor has advised me to give up those intimate little dinners for four, unless, of course, there are three other people eating with me."

*I will lift up my eyes unto the hills.
From whence cometh my help?*

*My help cometh from the Lord
Who made heaven and earth. ^{iv}*

I should probably have that painted on the door of my refrigerator. But temptation is not only in there; it's in here (inside us) and in here (the church) and out there; it's everywhere! We're wrong to think of temptation as just the desire to cheat or steal or do violence to ourselves or others. It's much more complicated than that, and the devil's temptations are far more subtle.

How did Jesus know that turning stones to bread was a bad idea? His people were poor, often hungry. Performing signs and wonders pointing to his Messiahship...what's wrong with that? He will go on to do greater miracles than the devil suggests. How did he know?

Simple. He knew the Bible. Every time the devil tried to misuse the beloved 91st Psalm for his own purpose, Jesus responded with another more relevant verse – from Deuteronomy of all places. Do you think of reading Deuteronomy as a way to put on the whole armor of God? It is. Jesus told Satan that he trusted and depended upon God alone. Satan's temptation was to try and persuade Jesus to trust in himself, his own ability, his accomplishments, but God had filled Jesus with the Holy Spirit, and given him wisdom in scripture, a pattern to follow. That's how he knew.

Peter Gomes, the late minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard, said that, "Temptation masquerades most cleverly in areas of moral ambiguity where good people are tempted to do good things for the wrong reason, or bad things for a good and high purpose. Self-deception, pride and moral ambition are the means by which temptation engages the soul, *and in the name of virtue vice is given aid and comfort.*"^v Seems like a timely word for us. Even the devil can quote scripture.

The devil tempted Jesus to do good by taking the easy way out... sensation instead of substance, salvation without a cross. The devil was trying to convince Jesus to be less than God created and wanted him to be, to compromise his own integrity and authenticity as God's Son, to sacrifice trust and faith for certainty, to bet on a sure thing.

How did Jesus know what the devil was doing? Simple. He knew the scriptures.

That struggle to find our authentic selves is at the heart of the spiritual practice of Lent for us. Lent ought to take us to a place of self-examination, even a wilderness of uncertainty and doubt, if that's what it takes, as we search our own hearts and determine if there is any pride in us, any desire to hedge our bets – you know -- just in case God doesn't come through for us. Lent is a time to test our faith and see if, in our search for comfort or certainty we've made any bad choices.

Here's a personal example. When our older daughter started high school we urged her to apply to MAST, an elite STEM program that provided the very best high school education our community had to offer. She was accepted and the pressure was awful. The first year was particularly bad; there were a lot of days when she didn't think she could continue, but somehow she graduated with honors and a MAST medallion. Earlier that year as her classmates were applying to Harvard, MIT, Dartmouth and Cal Tech, she told her dad and me, "I can't keep

doing this,” and we said, “Okay.” At the MAST graduation party, hers was the only liberal arts college on the cake.

Tawes and I looked at each other and said, “This world needs more women in science, technology, engineering and math.” Yes, yes it does. “But she’s a Christian. She has to go where she believes God is calling her to be.” “She’ll make a lot more money in a STEM profession.” Yes, she will. “But she’s a Christian. She has to learn to live by faith.”

She graduated with a BA in art and sociology from Presbyterian College. It was the best parenting decision we ever made.

How did we know? We didn’t. We were winging it. But thanks to *our* parents we came to that decision with a working knowledge of the Bible, even Deuteronomy!

Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, once compared theology and the Bible to the guardrails that border the narrow roads in the Swiss Alps. Only a fool would try to drive those dangerous roads without guardrails, but it would be equally foolish to mistake the guardrails for the road. Jesus Christ is the road we travel, and the Bible, interpreted by the Beloved Community, is what protects and guards us against dangerous deviations. We must never confuse the two. There is always the temptation to worship the Bible itself.^{vi} That’s called bibliolatry, making an idol out of the Bible, worshiping the Bible itself rather than the God of the Bible. There’s also the temptation of literalism, worshiping and following the literal words themselves rather than seeking out their meaning and application for our own day. And there’s the sin of culturalism, excessive adherence to the social norms and culture of the times in which the Bible was written. The word of God transcends time. Resist those temptations. Jesus said: “Worship the Lord, your God and serve only him.” Amen? Amen.

ⁱ *Amistad*, DreamWorks Pictures, 1997

ⁱⁱ Luke 3:22

ⁱⁱⁱ John 1:29

^{iv} Psalm 121:1-2 KJV

^v Peter Gomes. *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, William Morrow and Co., 1996, 271

^{vi} Gomes spells this out in detail in the book noted above.