

“There Is Only One God”

February 26, 2023

I am going to start this sermon with two assumptions. The first is that the temptations in the wilderness were real temptations and that Jesus really, truly, all the way, heart, mind, soul, and body, suffered these temptations because he is and was fully human. The temptations are not a trick or an illusion. We cannot have it both ways; we cannot say Jesus experienced everything we did, except sin and temptation. Either the temptations were real or the whole story is pointless and that the incarnation wasn't an incarnation, wasn't God becoming human. Either Jesus was fully human or he wasn't; and if he wasn't.

The second assumption is that the opening verse of the Gospel lesson means exactly what it says. I know you heard it a minute ago, but listen again: “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” Jesus was led by the Spirit. Of God. Jesus was not led by the devil. Jesus, about whom a voice from heaven has just said, “This is the Beloved with whom I am well pleased,” was promptly led by the Spirit (of God) into the wilderness to be tempted.

In other words, dear friends, God's universe is not dualistic. There are not two gods; there is only one. I understand that you know that. You have known there is one God since Sunday school days. As our Jewish friends say every Shabbat: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God alone!”

Ah, but do you believe it?

Dualism is so much easier to believe: there is God who is all things good, holy, loving, joyful, gracious, creative, abundant, just, merciful and eternal. And then there is Satan (by whatever name we use) who embodies all those qualities we define as unholy, those things we call “bad” or “evil.” This is the being (we would like to believe) who tempted Jesus and tempts us. This being might be called “Not God.” Dualism is the marvelous illusion that lets us believe that any part of creation (any part, any part at all) can be separate from God – ever. But scripture is very clear about this: “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” Jesus was led by the Spirit. Of God.

Let me cut to the chase. There is one God, only one, and God embraces, embodies, contains, enfolds everything. Everything. All of it. Those verbs aren't really adequate because there are no adequate words: all our words are finite and imply finitude. Maybe we can simply say, God is All. There is nothing found in creation that is not also found in God. There isn't anything that is separate, because to separate anything out would mean that God is limited, partial, incomplete.

Jesus comprehends this in a way that few of us are willing to accept. Jesus realizes that his temptations are within him as behaviors and character traits that, taken to an extreme, become dangerous. He says this later in Mark when he says it isn't what we put into ourselves that makes us unclean, but what we give out, what emerges from us, what we think or do or say. So Jesus, the model of atonement – being at one with God in all respects – follows the Spirit (of God) out into the barren places where there is nothing else to distract him, to wrestle with the inner tendencies that are likely to undermine his coming ministry . . . like pride, like power, like

over-confidence, like (you should forgive me) a savior complex – he IS our savior but he did not have a “savior complex.”

But the message in this lesson for us is not about the choice Jesus made; it is about the one we need to make. It is not about how Jesus saw the universe, but about how honestly we are willing to see it. There is no such thing as “substitution discipleship.” Jesus wrestling with his temptations in the desert does not substitute for us wrestling honestly with ours right here and now.

I receive an email each week from the Christian Century magazine and this week there was an illustration that brought back some memories of my seminary years. It was written by Kathryn Johnston, a Presbyterian pastor in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. She wrote of the ordination testing procedure that she needed to walk through and her need to pass a Bible content exam as one of the requirements. And it reminded me of the process I needed to conquer some 55 years ago. It was called the English Bible exam. Many of us mockingly called it the Bible Trivia exam. You know it was the kind of exam that Baptist students could pass, no problem. But it was much different for Moravians and, I suspect, would be for UCC candidates also. They were pure trivia questions. Here’s the nub of it – our class was the only class in the history of Moravian Theological Seminary that had to pass it. Prior to that, many of our local congregations were complaining that too many of their pastors preached all this peace and justice, race and gender, culture issues, theology and doctrine “stuff” but they did not “preach the Bible” and, of course, the seminary was blamed. So, the seminary instituted this exam that immediately proved to be silly and so subsequent classes never had to deal with it. However, our class was not immune. Well, we had a small class – only six of us – four Moravians, one Czech United Brethren, and one United Methodist. Three of them passed it on the first try. Two more passed it on the second try. And then . . . there was me. I had to take it a third time – and you could only take it once a semester. So, I was down to my last try before my ordination interview. The crux of it is that somehow, by pure grace, I passed it with flying colors on that third try. I think that the truth of the matter is that I had remembered enough of the questions from the first two tries to finally excel.

Thinking of that and remembering the angst I felt at the time, I realize that there are untold instances when we are confronted with testing. For instance, many professions require testing to make sure folks are ready for the job. Plumbers, electricians, truck drivers, doctors, lawyers, ministers . . . but, the Son of God? You’d think the dove descending at the baptism of Jesus and the godly voice saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” would get Jesus an exemption, but no such luck.

In Christ, God chose to stand with us and by us in love—fully human and fully divine—and it is the latter that is being tested here. To echo Disney’s “Aladdin,” God has “phenomenal cosmic power” but, because God chose to become human, in this case God descended into a truly human form. Jesus is fasting in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, and he’s just been given an opportunity. But this test isn’t about food. It’s about power. The test, Jesus, is for you to show the power you really have. Given that you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. Throw yourself down and let the angels catch you. Take the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus is a survivor of a mass murder and has grown up among an oppressed people. Will he leap at the chance to avenge the murders of the innocent? The temptation for vengeance is made all the more intense by the power at God's hand to achieve it in full. But instead, God makes the choice for love. After 40 days in the wilderness, three temptations, three refusals to submit, and angels who attend him, Jesus gets on with the task at hand: teaching, healing, and loving. Jesus withstood temptation because his love for us was greater than his earthly desire. If our love for God reflects this strength, then we can withstand anything that threatens to stand between us and God's love.

As we depart this morning, I would encourage us to remember that we, we who embody both good and bad, are ready and willing to exit from here with a renewed dedication to be united in purpose to follow the Christ who faced the same temptations as do we. The Spirit of God does lead us but does not dictate our responses to the temptations we face. That is our task. The choice is ours – just as Moses reminded the wandering Israelites centuries before Jesus. Immediately before his death and his handing the mantle to Joshua, Moses echoed these words of God to the nation: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” That choice is also offered to us.

When we choose a destructive path or choose to allow one of our temptations to define us, there is no one to blame. Not our parents, our spouses, our children; not God, not the devil, and not our evil twin Skippy. We chose that path, perhaps unwisely, perhaps carelessly, perhaps apathetically, but we chose. And we can choose intentionally and joyfully to behave differently.

Let this Lenten season serve as our opportunity to once again proclaim our intention to choose differently. Amen.

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