

A Sermon by Alex Evans – from Sunday, February 10, 2008

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA

Matthew 4:1-11 -- “The Jesus Way”

John Lipsey is one person in this church who is not hesitant to say what he thinks. All of us who know John also know that he thinks about many different things. And one thing that John has asked me about across my years of ministry here has to do with “the devil.” John thinks that we do not talk about the devil often enough, and he regularly prods me to teach and preach about how the devil fits into our life and faith. I keep telling him that ministry is not about “the devil”; it is about God and what God calls us to do following Jesus Christ.

Well, today’s Scripture passage is about Jesus’ encounter with the devil. So I called John this week just to make sure he was going to be in church this first Sunday of Lent; this passage gives us an opportunity to deal with how the devil fits in with our life and faith. In fact, face to face with the devil, Jesus shows us a better way – the Jesus Way – which informs our own lives as we seek to live well and faithfully.

Before we launch into this particular passage, I want to say a few things as clearly as I can about the devil. This is for John Lipsey – but it is for all of us.

First, the devil does not appear in the Bible very many times at all, and most of the references to the devil appear in this passage and the parallel passages to this one in Mark and Luke. In nearly every instance, he is the instigator of evil, one who is opposed to God or against God. His very name, “the devil” actually means “the tempter,” or maybe better, “the splitting one” – the one who splits us, or wants to split us, away from God and all that God intends. The devil is the embodiment, the name given, to those evil forces that come at us personally and seek to split us away from God’s love and purposes.

Second, whenever we come upon the devil, or demons, or other forms of evil in the Bible, God, or Jesus, or God’s Spirit, always wins out against the devil. Evil is real. Evil is part of life. Evil can come upon us closely and very personally. But evil does not ever hold the day. God holds the day. God prevails. That is the consistent message of Scripture.

Third, whenever we encounter the devil in the Scriptures, there is no detailed description. He does not have horns and a pitchfork. He does not have a threatening scowl on his face. He is not a monster. Actually, that would be nice. When certain things emerge in our lives – people, moments of decision, circumstances - we do not always know what is evil and what is not. Evil is can be very hard to recognize. When we find ourselves in various situations, we do not always realize the temptations and dangers. Nor is there anywhere in the Bible a history of where the devil comes from. Whenever the devil appears, he just appears. This affirms that evil and temptation are present in the world, that they come at us at unexpected and in personal terms; but the Bible does not say where the devil comes from or how he actually looks.

So those are important points always to keep in mind: though he is in the Bible, the devil is not a very prominent figure in the Bible; he never wins – God always wins; and most of the stuff about the devil comes from culture and tradition, and even our imaginations. And all of that should help us keep the devil in proper perspective.

But we do have this familiar story of Jesus encountering the devil – it appears in all three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So it is an important story; and I think it is important in showing us “the Jesus way” – which wants to speak to us about our way – as we are called to follow Jesus. What we see in this story is how Jesus lives with clear focus and intention, especially in the face of the devil, which tells us something about how we are called to live in the face of all our challenges and temptations. So let’s look more closely at this story of the devil and Jesus.

Jesus has been in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. The number forty goes way back in the Old Testament – it is a complete number for trials and preparation. Forty days and forty nights was how long it rained on Noah and the ark. Forty years is the number of days the people wandered in the wilderness before Moses led them to the Promised Land. Forty days was how long Moses fasted before he received the Law from the Lord on Mt. Sinai. Forty days is the length of Lent – not counting Sundays - the season of preparation and renewal before Easter.

So after forty days in the wilderness – a time of trial and preparation, Jesus is surely hungry, lonely, vulnerable; and this is when the devil appears to tempt him, to lure him off his way of faithfulness, to be something less than what God intends. The Tempter wants to get Jesus to go the Devil’s way, not Jesus’ way.

The devil starts with where Jesus might be weakest – his stomach. “Since you are God’s Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread.” Jesus is hungry, so Jesus can begin his ministry by providing himself with a good meal. He can turn the good stuff of creation into a commodity – stones to bread - and do something useful with it – feed himself. What is the real harm in this? It will even launch him into a career of doing good for others, meeting others needs, satisfying their hungers, fulfilling them. The temptation is for Jesus to meet his own needs – satisfy his hunger and have some bread – so that he could then go on to meet others needs. Well, the real danger, the temptation is to be lured into a life defined in consumer terms, of simply meeting needs.

Is life mostly about meeting needs? If there is a problem, we love a challenge. We see the need and want to go and address it. Certainly the world is not lacking in needs – we need food for the hungry, we need homes for the homeless, we need medicine for the sick, we need care for creation, we need peace in a warring world. We need lots of things. There are so many needs around – and our whole economy is based on meeting needs. Moreover, our economy is based in large part of creating needs that can be met – we need this item to do this better; we need this item to feel better about ourselves; we need this item to be happier and healthier; we need this item to be more beautiful; we need this item so our children can be smarter; and on and on. I like to tease Ginger and say that if I can just get some new golf clubs, my game will not only surely improve, I won’t have any problems at all. ☺ We think like this – meet certain needs and all will be well; and what a temptation!

And then we begin to see where this goes – our capacity for meeting needs often makes us more and more selfish, more deceived. AND, with all of our ability to meeting needs, we have an astonishing capacity for not noticing the needs of those who are not like us, or not near us, or who will overly inconvenience us.

So Jesus answers the devil by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to stay alive” – meaning, it is not only about meeting needs. It is not only about a

commodity and using it to satisfy a need. Jesus refuses to be pulled off track. Jesus is going to meet people's needs, and Jesus intends for our lives to be about meeting needs too. But Jesus' way cannot be reduced to just meeting needs – and neither should ours. Our lives are to be grounded and connected to God and to one another. Without life with God, and life with one another, we have no life; and eventually we run dry at meeting needs.

Not too long ago, a man came but the church seeking help. We sorted out his dilemma, found some funds for his need. We were ready to send him on his way so we could get back to work. But then he wanted to talk. And it became very clear that his request for help was only a small piece of the situation. What he longed for was a sense of care and relationship, someone to share in his troubles. We do not live by bread alone, but by so much more. “The Jesus way” reminds us of that so clearly. Jesus refuses to be lured into thinking that life is about commodities and meeting needs only, but about much more. This is instructive for us.

Then the devil took Jesus to the Holy City. He sat him on the top of the temple and said, “Since you are God's Son, jump. The angels will catch you.”

I got on the elevator at the hospital in Roanoke this week. It was toward the end of the day. One other person got on this elevator. When she walked in, she said, “I'm so glad the day is almost over and I can go home.” We all know how she felt. So, I said to her, “long day, eh?” She said “Yep. But then soon after I go home, I eat dinner and go to bed, and before I know it I am right back here tomorrow.” She sighed.

We all know what she was saying. But it made me sad. Life can feel like such a grind. “American Idol” on TV, or some other show, or even the talking heads about the presidential race, or the Super Bowl, or something else just do not seem to fill our lives. What about a little excitement, a little pizzazz?! Wouldn't that be great for us?

The devil is luring Jesus to dazzle the crowds of people down below. The devil is tempting Jesus to pour a little excitement into their otherwise ordinary and dull lives. “Jump, Jesus! The people will never forget you. For years to come they will be talking about your dazzling feat and the angel-rescue. Show them all you can do!”

What is better than an entertaining career? What could be more than supplying ecstasies, or amazing acts to help us get away from our drab lives? Jesus would be the real hero, the supreme American idol. The ratings would be through the roof and everyone would be happy, right?

Just as Jesus is not interested in merely meeting needs, Jesus is also not interested in merely entertaining us. Jesus is not interested in diverting us from the essence of life. Jesus never used miracles as short-cuts or labor-saving devices. “No Christian would ever assume that Jesus, in his carpentry shop, ever laid aside his hammer and used the Holy Spirit to drive in an awkward nail” (from Austin Farrer. See E. Peterson, The Jesus Way, p. 33). That is not how Jesus works – not the Jesus way. All of Jesus' miracles were only to show us the “more” that is inherent in life, to reveal to us the nearness of God in certain situations, a level of love and life that is available to us through faith and obedience. The way of Jesus is a way, not of celebrating the extra-ordinary – like flying off the Temple – but a way of living deeply and fully with people, in the here and now, in the places we find ourselves.

So Jesus again quotes Deuteronomy: “do not put the Lord to the test,” - meaning life is more than impressing people, wowing people. For Jesus, life is about being with people, loving and engaging people and therefore finding Life. That too speaks to us – we are to look for life not in extravagant moments, but in the personal encounters.

For the third test, the devil took Jesus to an even higher place – the top of a mountain where they could see all the kingdoms of the world. “All this is yours – just worship me – that’s it.”

What an offer! That is what we want, right? We want Jesus to rule all the world in a way that promises peace, hope, light, justice, and prosperity. Create governments free of corruption. Create equity and joy everywhere. What about life without guns and violence? “Thy Kingdom come.”

But, of course, it would be on the devil’s terms – it would be quite unholy, because this will be given IF Jesus falls and worships the devil.

If you have not seen the movie “JUNO,” I hope you will. It is about a wonderful and sassy and smart 16 year old girl who gets pregnant. She struggles with what to do with herself, with her baby, and all her relationships. Finally, she decides to give her baby up for adoption; and she finds a seemingly perfect home for her child – she plans to give her baby to this certain couple. They live in a picture perfect house in an impressive neighborhood. They are beautiful people with fine jobs and seemingly all of life in place. They have everything,... except a child. So it seems like a nice match.

But appearances only go so far – and for this couple, life is not so perfect. No matter how it looks on the outside, that is not the best or final measure of things on the inside. We can have everything, and have no relationships that sustain us. We can have everything, and have no soul, no joy, no life. I invite you to go see the movie to see how it ends, but it relates to this passage in reminding us that the fine things of life come not from what we have, or what we rule over, but through love, through our hearts, through our relationships, which is what the movie is about.

And that is what Jesus knows better than any of us. The devil wants to give him the world – but Jesus says, “beat it Satan,” and quotes Deuteronomy again: “worship the Lord and serve only God.” It is not about power, like the devil tempted, but about love. It is not about throne and bureaucracy, but about relational trust and worshipful devotion. And Jesus is done with the devil!

So, all of these encounters are to contrast the Jesus way, with the devil’s way. “The Jesus way” refuses to turn stones to bread – because life is not just about meeting my needs, our needs; life is about relationships and life together. “The Jesus way” refuses to put on a circus spectacular, showing off his dazzling ways. The Jesus way wants not to impress people, but to engage people, where they are, and then call them to a new way of being, or serving, of sharing and living and giving. “The Jesus way” is also not about power, which is such a temptation for all of us, but about life and love, and building from the bottom up a world of equity and hope, justice and joy. The Jesus way is about personal interactions, grounded in real relationships, engaged in love and care, which are connected to people’s lives and promote the coming reign of God in the world!

What does this mean for us? We are called to live “the Jesus way!” And in these days of Lent – a season of renewal and preparation and refreshment – perhaps we can make some progress in “the Jesus way.”

What if we work on creating homes and communities that are not about consumption – about satisfying our selfish needs – but really and truly focus on life with God and life with one another. How many hours do TV, and shopping, and for youth - video games, and other mindless activities get from us each day? What actually defines your life and your family? Is it work? It is frantic racing from here to there? Does it have to be that way? Are our lives about relationships and God's purposes? Are they about interaction and compassion? I want to challenge all of us to think and work on that!

What if we seek to live more deeply, more faithfully? What if we quit denying that our way of life is having devastating affects around the world, not only on others, but on the planet? What if we continue to make changes that bring about a better world? What kind of people do we want to be? What kind of people does God call us to be? What if following “the Jesus way” would mean creating communities of care and love, of advocacy and hope, that encouraged us in life and faith, and helped move the world to a new way – equity for all, hope for all, life for all?

Prayer: Holy God – the Jesus Way! Let that be our way! Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, February 10, 2008, by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.