

My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Psalms 91:1–2, 9–16

Romans 10:8b–13

Luke 4:1–13

Text: Psalm 91:1-2

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’

Introduction

In some respects, for Christians it was something Satan said that made Psalm 91 famous. Okay, I admit that that is an overstatement used as a rhetorical device to arrest attention. So, now that I have your attention, better stated, when Christians read Psalm 91 they typically recognize that a portion of this Psalm was quoted by Satan in one of his temptations of Jesus: “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” This was when Satan said to Jesus, ‘if you are the Son of God you’re bullet-proof, no harm can befall you. Jump and see.’

1. Jesus knows this Psalm too. And he knows how it begins. You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’ What does it mean for Jesus to ‘live in the shelter of the Most High’ and ‘abide in the shadow of the Almighty?’ It means that he will say of the One he calls the Father, “My refuge and my fortress: my God, in whom I trust.” When you reflect on the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness isn’t this the truth he lives each time he answers the tempter—‘God is my refuge and my fortress, the One in whom I trust.’ Each answer Jesus gives is Jesus declaring his relationship with the Father—my refuge and my fortress.

In the gospels the story of Jesus’ temptation follows immediately after the story of Jesus’ baptism. At the baptism we are told that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The two stories are linked by these themes of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life and his identification as the Son of God with whom the Father is ever pleased. What is Jesus doing in the wilderness? He is working out what all of this

means for what is ahead for him. After this he comes to Galilee, filled with the power of the Spirit, and launches his ministry.

It is instructive to note that each scriptural answer Jesus gives comes from Israel's wilderness experience (Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:13, 16). Like Israel in their wilderness journey, Jesus is also tested in the wilderness. The word translated 'temptation' also means 'testing.' I invite you to note that each temptation or test is aimed by Satan at deflecting Jesus from his understanding of his mission as the Son of God; each temptation aimed at driving a wedge between the Father and the Son; each salvo thrown to change the course heading for Jesus just even a little. "Jesus, come on, there is only you out here in the wilderness, who is going to notice if you turn a stone into some bread."

Friends, we live in a world of competing stories. It was no different for Jesus, though the stories of his day may have had different narratives from the self-understanding of today's world. Even so, the question for Jesus is also ours—what narrative will guide our lives? In such a world, Jesus had to discern what it would mean to live his life in obedience to one he called the Father. Jesus had to know his story. We too must know the Christian story in order to resist the false stories that seek to take us captive. As we read Luke's version carefully, we can see two competing stories: the story that Jesus taps into in order to resist the devil and successfully navigate the temptations laid before him and the narrative the devil presents. With each test we see Jesus insist that it is God who is his refuge and fortress, the One he will trust.

Today, on the first Sunday in the church season of Lent, the gospel story appointed for reading annually is the story of Jesus' wilderness temptation. Last Sunday we read the story of the Transfiguration which marks the turning point in Jesus' ministry when he is now headed for what will happen in Jerusalem. Lent is the season of heading to Jerusalem with Jesus where he will suffer for us. Christians are reminded again to think about our lives and what we must take up or lay down in response to Jesus' giving his all for us. During Lent, the Sunday readings are gospel stories of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem all except today when we reach back to this earlier wilderness story that precedes Jesus' ministry. What might be the reason?

I noted with you a moment ago that each of Satan's temptations are directed at sending Jesus off course from the path he knows he must tread. "Jesus, what could meet the needs of the poor in the world better than you using your 'Son of God' powers turning stones into bread? Jesus, if you had the authority I can give you,

you could fix the world, you just have to switch teams. Jesus, think about the attention you could garner, as the Son of God, if you just showed yourself invincible to harm.” The point I invite you to reflect upon is that Jesus made the decision that his path would lead to Jerusalem; refusing any change in course or narrative offered by Satan no matter how enticing or reasonable; Jesus made this determination in the wilderness before his ministry began.

Luke tells us that the devil departed from him until an opportune time. It seems to me that an ‘opportune time’ came just around the second time we hear the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be the Son of God, at the transfiguration. Peter had made the declaration, shared by the other disciples, that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. It was an exciting and heady moment. It was then that Jesus began to teach the disciples that he “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Peter was so taken aback that he took Jesus aside and rebuked him for talking nonsense. Recall how Jesus responded; “Get behind me, Satan!” (adversary). Jesus can hear the voice of the tempter trying to send him off course through the voice of someone close to him.

We live in a culture that has embraced the myth of the autonomous self. There is no big ‘T’ truth, only your truth and my truth. Not only is the human thought to be self-autonomous, but also self-authenticating. This ideology leads us to look within to determine who we are. In the world’s self-understanding, God has been rejected and so our biggest fears are related to our finitude, our health and safety. Christians are to live by a different narrative, the true story of the world made known to us in Jesus Christ. We see Jesus navigating around these false stories through intimate acquaintance with the scriptures as the word that reveals the shelter of the Most High; that shows how to abide in the shadow of the Almighty; that marks the path of trusting God as refuge and fortress.

2. Throughout Luke’s gospel his focus is on Jesus and what he is doing. It is no different here in the wilderness story. Luke wants us to see Jesus facing these temptations. Perhaps you also wonder why the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness the scene of Satan’s temptation. Please keep in mind the picture the Bible paints of the world is that it is a fallen world. It is shot through and through with spirit and not all spirits are good. Anyone following Jesus walks through life against the world’s prevailing winds. Temptation is common to all of us, as the writer of Hebrews notes. Jesus’ complete identification with us sinners means he faces this world as well.

I invite you also to note how the devil's role falls within the purpose of God. What is intended by the devil as a means of defeating Jesus becomes, in the purpose of God, the occasion of the devil's defeat. Each attack has failed. The devil has carried out fully every kind of temptation, and departs, but only until an opportune moment. Luke wants his hearers to understand the ministry of Jesus as a period of victory over Satan and the demons. Luke wants us to be confident in Jesus and his victory on our behalf.

Luke also tells this story so that believers will be encouraged to resist temptations that will send them off course from following Jesus. It was the Apostle James who said, 'resist the devil, and he will flee from you.' Keep in mind that James said that in conjunction with the more important focus of 'submit yourselves to God' and 'draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.' (James 4:7-8) In this story we note how profoundly Jesus reflects on the scriptures and their application for facing these winds of the world that blow in other direction.

Friends, I ask you to carefully note that there is a big difference between us and Jesus. Jesus was the one human covenant-partner who rendered to the Father the glad and cheerful obedience God created the human to live. You will note that I have not tried to extract 'principles' for resisting temptation from the story of Jesus' wilderness encounter with the devil. This is not to say that there isn't much to be learned here for our own walk with Him. For example, Jesus' response that life is more than bread witnesses to the truth that we are not alone in a universe that is slowly dying of its own accord nor are we left to do our best to make up happy stories in the face of what many regard as the ultimate meaninglessness of things. Life is meant to be lived as a living engagement with the living God.

Psalm 19 contains that wonderful poem that extols the wonder of God's word; it is perfect reviving the soul, it is sure making wise the simple, it is clear enlightening the eyes...and so on. And then the Psalmist goes on to say, 'Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.' "But who can detect their errors?" The Psalmist knows the corruption of our hearts. It is my habit to pray the Psalms from the 1662 Common Book of Prayer. I love the way it translates the Psalmist's question. "Who can tell how oft he offendeth: O cleanse thou me from my secret faults."

I say this to remind us that though freed from sin the corruption of our hearts is much deeper than we imagine. Yes, we are to discern in what God has said to walk in the way our Lord has called us. Yes, we are to be transformed by the

renewing of our minds discerning what is the will of God. But our focus is on what Jesus has done for us and the victory he has won over death and all its errand boys. Our walk is in response to what he has done for us.

3. Rev. Dr. Victor Shepherd wrote that in this first temptation Jesus is faced with the temptation to be relevant. What, after all, could be more relevant than turning stones into bread? Stones abound; bread is scarce. Jesus looked at hungry people every day. Surely a little more bread would have gone a long way.

At the same time, there were many ways that bread could be made in Palestine and should be made. But it wasn't going to be made as it should until some men and women were moved to make it and share it; and they weren't going to be moved until they had undergone heart-transplants at the hand of the master himself. When our Lord was tempted to collapse his entire vocation and ministry into meeting instantly immediate physical need he said to the tempter, "One doesn't live by bread alone but by the truth and reality of a living engagement with the living God!"

The truth of the gospel for the church means always sailing against the prevailing wind; it means beckoning others to its counter-culture; it means sounding the beat of a different drummer. The folly of a church bent on relevance, of course, is that it tries to out-world the world. It adopts the world's agenda; it thinks with the world's self-understanding; it parrots the world's pronouncements.

This is not to say that the church should bury its head in the sand and ignore what's going on all around it or remain unaware of the sorts of suffering people endure in our era. It is to insist that underneath what's going on in our era, for good and for ill, there remains in every era the deepest human need, the profoundest human heartache, the most frustrating self-contradiction. Regardless of the era the deepest human need is for God. The most frustrating self-contradiction is the ingrained futility born of our fallen nature, born of our systemic sinnership. All of this is precisely what the world calls irrelevant. And all of this is what the church knows to be supremely relevant.

Our Lord never belittled material need. He healed the sick and fed the hungry and assisted the storm-tossed. But he resisted the temptation to do this in any way that would inhibit even those he helped from coming to see their deeper need and their profounder predicament. He resisted the temptation to be immediately relevant in any way that would render them even less sensitive to the provision God has made

for what ails them most. He resisted the temptation to conform to the world's opinion of relevance in order to acquaint them with the ultimate relevance.

Jesus stuck to his story so we might know it too. You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'