



*“It’s in the Fine Print”*

Luke 4:1-13

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

**February 25, 2007**

First Sunday in Lent

Every Sunday worship service in North America is a counter-cultural event. Here we place God at the center of life and devotion and confess that God is Lord, and we are not. Such behavior runs upstream against this culture.

The Sundays of Lent, indeed the entire six-week experience of Lent, seems radically counter-cultural if you think about it – and I trust you will think about it! Here we are devoting forty days to reflection on our weaknesses and fallibility, not an ordinary part of typical American self-help and success thinking. Lent is about self-denial in a world determined to deny us nothing.

Lent points toward our spiritual formation. In these days the church calls us to ask a basic question: What does it mean to be me in this world and in light of God’s claim on my life?

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent is always one of the accounts of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. We just heard Luke’s version. The story sounds remote, even irrelevant to our modern lives. After all, it’s about a forty day fast in the wilderness, hardly the stuff of ordinary lives.

And what about those temptations? I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been tempted to turn stones into bread, jump off the top of the church, or rule the world.

If this is the beginning of God’s invasion of time and space with salvation, I’d expect some kind of clash of the Titans, a titanic clash between good and evil with cosmic fire works. Instead, the story happens in a quiet desert with a conversation between Jesus and The Tempter.

But, as always, there is more to the story than meets the eye. Something larger, deeper and potentially life-changing is going on in the desert. It’s part of story that began long, long ago in the mists of pre-history in a garden named Eden.

You know the story. It ends with humankind banished from paradise to a land east of Eden. Something went terribly wrong in the garden with disastrous consequences.

We know something is wrong with the world – with ourselves. Each of us discovers it in our own way. Helmut Thielicke, a German, was one of the leading theologians of the last century. Thielicke began his career as a pastor in Stuttgart in WWII.

Toward the end of the war, all the draft eligible men were in the army and the anti-aircraft battlements of Stuttgart were being manned by high school boys. Some of the boys, who should have been in his confirmation class, asked their commander if Thielicke could come to the battlements to teach them. Told no, they persisted, and

finally Thielicke was allowed to spend time with the boys on the battlefield. Night after night, he found himself with boys living on the boundary of life and death.

One night Thielicke was called to the front for another reason. Their position had been hit by a low level attack, and the father of one of the boys, who had come to visit, was killed while his son was manning the gun. The fourteen-year-old boy carried his father to the city in a wheel-barrow. The boys were traumatized. Thielicke did what he could to comfort them, but felt utterly inadequate. On his way home late in the night he had a clarifying experience:

But then the thing happened that accounts for my relating this incident at all. On my way home the moonlight lay upon the quiet valley, the white flowers of the trees shimmered in this soft light, and an unspeakable peace and stillness rested upon the landscape....

I mention this, not to be romantic or to gain a sentimental effect, but rather because for me this hour was a parable of the dark threshold which, the account of the Fall says, man has crossed. Before me lay the seemingly whole and healthy world of a springtime night. But in that moment its very peace was like a stab of pain. For I knew that the peace of nature is delusive, and that I had just spoken, encompassed by a sea of blossoms, with boys whose eyes were filled with dread even though they bravely swallowed their tears. (*How the World Began*, p. 122)

This “dis-ease” of our planet is often profound: matters of war and peace, wealth and poverty, justice and oppression. Too often it is simply banal: why the fascination with the life and death of Anna Nicole Smith by the media and our celebrity-starved culture?

We all sigh for Eden, longing for that paradise which we can never experience. It’s a sign of eternity planted deep in the human soul. We know life should be better; this world should be different in this land east of Eden.

It began when the Tempter sidled up to Eve, “Psst,” he lisped. Notice how temptation begins. There is no solicitation to obvious and destructive evil, say greed or sex. No, the destructive power of sin is in the fine print at the bottom of the temptation.

The temptation begins with a theological conversation. Now God told Adam and Eve they were free to experience everything in the Garden except the one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That territory, what is good and what is evil, was God’s alone to determine.

“Surely,” the Tempter suggested, “God didn’t really mean that you couldn’t have access to the whole of the Garden, every aspect of human experience. Do you really think God is so narrow-minded?”

The temptation is simple: don’t take God seriously. You can decide your own fate, manage your own life, determine what is good and evil. We can write our own rules for life. Maybe God is like dessert at the end of a fine meal. It’s a good option, but it’s an option. We can live with God or without God.

Adam and Eve crossed the line. They declared independence. They decided to write their own rules for life. They claimed autonomy from God. Their self-interest would be the main interest.

And we join them there – each in our own way. Temptation seldom includes the consequences of human independence. No, the destructive character of sin is in the fine print at the bottom of the temptation.

Ever since, we humans are lost in devices of our own making. And we live with the accumulated consequences of greed, lust, power, envy – and all the rest of the ugly consequences of moral life without God.

And ever since, God has been calling us lost children to come home. Time and again prophets and apostles tell us that if we return to God and love God and turn in love to our neighbors, the world will be a better place, and we will be better people. And usually we pay little attention.

Finally God sent his own son to “seek and save those who are lost.” At the very beginning of his mission on God’s behalf and ours, God led Jesus into the wilderness. There were crucial matters to settle at the very beginning.

In the wilderness Jesus wrestled with his identity and his destiny. What did it mean to be Jesus, the Son of God? What is God’s mission, and how is it accomplished in this land east of Eden?

We join him there. Lent asks us what it means to be us. What is it to be a creation of God, a child of God? What is my life in the light of eternity here and now?

Jesus’ temptations were subtle and unexpected. That’s the character of temptation since the Garden. The story of Jesus’ temptation has no obvious solicitations to the “big” sins of this world. There’s no pot of gold to excite his greed and ultimately, spoil his soul. And there is no sexual temptation to snare his imagination and stain his conscience. As always, the destruction is in the fine print at the bottom of the temptation.

Jesus’ first temptation is social. “If you are the Son of God,” the Tempter said, “turn this stone into bread. What a spectacle that would be – and what good it would do. Imagine the world hunger you could alleviate. Food for the masses and publicity for the kingdom of God: what an opportunity!”

The second temptation was political. The Tempter offered Jesus the empires of the world. “Imagine the wonderful uses of power such a new and divine empire offers. Why, laws against evil and laws enforcing good behavior. Sounds like heaven on earth!”

But Jesus knew political power alone is a moral dead end. Our Puritan ancestors tried it and it failed. They could force people to attend church on Sunday, but they had no control over their hearts.

Finally, the Tempter showed up with a religious temptation – complete with a biblical citation. “If you are the Son of God, manipulate God for your own purposes – say, make God save your life. After all look at this Bible passage. God promises to save you! Imagine the good publicity that would stir up!”

This temptation includes a warning. Beware of the man (or woman) who claims to know God’s will for the nation or for your life – and who quotes Scripture to certify the claim. Such men declared slavery was God’s will; child labor was God’s will, the inequality of women was God’s will, segregation was God’s will, apartheid was God’s will. Every war by every Christian nation, usually against another Christian nation, has claimed God’s will.

Jesus said no to them all. God had another path for him and the church. The kingdom of God is not founded on celebrity, power, or religious claims. Instead, God called Jesus to pour out his life in sacrificial service on behalf of the lost children of God, finally giving up his life on our behalf. God’s mission requires an alternative path.

**Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims**  
**Sermon 2/25/07**

The bottom line for the church and for each of us is this: look up from your life and recognize that the issue on earth is God's mission to bring shalom, wholeness, and healing, to this broken world.

God calls us to offer our lives in sacrificial service on behalf of that mission in the world. Here we are in Lent 2007. What is our life, your life? And, more importantly, in this forty day season, God calls us to contemplate the life and death of his son who made the ultimate sacrifice, a gift that brought eternity into the world.

Such contemplation ought to, no – it will – melt our cold hearts and compel us back across that line where we acknowledge God is the Lord, and we are not. And that, my friends, is very good news.

Amen.

© David C. Fisher, 2007