

ROMANS 10:8b-13 (p. 918)

MARCH 6, 2022

LUKE 4:1-13 (p. 834)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Engage our minds, Lord, with your Holy Word. Quicken our spirits, with your Holy Spirit. And move us, right now, out of our complacency, and into action in your Holy Name! Amen.

“CHOICES”

It was Sunday afternoon and I was exhausted! So, rather than attempt something productive, I plopped down in a chair and clicked on Netflix. But what should I watch? The choices were legion! And quite frankly, I was too tired to make one. So, I decided to go with an old standby, Robin Hood. Only that didn't help either. The choices were still legion! Have you ever noticed how many choices we have to make, on a daily basis?

I could watch the newest Robin Hood, with Jamie Foxx and Taron Egerton. But it seemed so unrealistic. I grew up on reruns of Douglas Fairbanks Jr. as Robin Hood, from back in 1920's. And Errol Flynn, from 1938. I remember watching Danny Kaye play Robin Hood, in "Amazing Technicolor", at my grandma's house when I was young. And Mel Brooks, in his parody, "Robin Hood; Men in Tights" as a teenager. I could go with Russell Crowe's Hollywood Blockbuster. I saw it on the Silver Screen, ten or twelve years ago. Or my all-time favorite, Kevin Costner's "Robin Hood; Prince of Thieves"! Which according to Netflix, came out over thirty years ago! That's a long time ago! But I went with it anyway. It's a great movie. Maybe you've seen it?

There is one scene in particular that I really love! Robin is trying to encourage his Merry Men, and motivate them into action. He strolls up to a young warrior taking aim at a practice target. The boy has been shooting extremely well, and seems a bit cocky. So, Robin asks him if he thinks he can shoot “amid distractions?” The boy smiles, and nods, demonstrating amazing confidence. He then raises his bow, and takes aim. Only just before he releases the string, Costner pokes his ear with the feathers of an arrow. The boy jumps, obviously distracted! His shot flies wide, missing the bulls-eye by several inches!

When the laughter quiets down, Maid Marian, who has been watching the whole scenario, slowly turns to Robin and asks if he thinks he can shoot “amid distractions”. And with his best Kevin Costner grin, Robin raises his bow, and takes aim. Just as he is about to release the arrow though, Marian leans in close, and flirtatiously blows a puff of air, lightly across his face! Costner pulls the shot wildly, missing the target all together! The arrow glances off of tree, ricochets to the left, and just barely misses the head of a bystander who is watching from the side! The laughter erupts once more!

Again, maybe you’ve seen it? And maybe, just maybe, you’re familiar with distractions? They come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, don’t they? They appear at various times, and in sundry ways. Some are irritating, or downright painful. But others, are quite pleasant indeed! Any distraction though, can cause you to “miss the mark”! In fact, the Greek word for “Sin” is “hamartia”. It’s actually an archery term. It literally means to “miss the mark”! But also means to “fall short of the Glory of God”. So, if you’ve ever wondered if you’ve ever sinned, just ask yourself if you’ve ever, “Fallen short of the Glory of God”!

Jesus is in the Wilderness, hungry and alone. He is out in the middle of nowhere, and has been for quite a while. Try to imagine how you'd feel after almost a month and half in the scorching desert sun! Imagine how hot and dirty, how tired and muggy, how miserable! I've been in the Judaeen Wilderness, and I can assure you that Jesus would have been extremely thirsty too. The air there is beyond dry. Any moisture is immediately sucked right out of every cell in your body! Your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth. Your lips crack. Before long, you even stop sweating! There just isn't any water left!

And after forty days and nights of Fasting, Jesus would have been extremely hungry too, don't you think? The text actually says so. Six weeks with no food. His physical strength would be nearly spent. His mental acuity, and emotional faculties, would be right on the edge. He is probably getting pretty low on patience too. And the truth is, He was most likely a bit ornery. That may be hard to visualize. But Jesus was fully human, right, as well as fully divine. He experienced everything that we experience. So, I think it's safe to say that He is tired and lonely at this point, down and out, in a desolate place, both hungry and weak. Things most likely appear bleak! And that's when the enemy comes slithering in, right in the heart of a compromised moment!

That's often how it happens. At our most vulnerable times, Satan arrives on the scene and tempts us with the exact thing that we are craving. Whatever it is we currently lack. In fact, that's one of the enemy's primary "modus operandi"! It's something we clearly need to guard against!

Jesus was “hungry”, really hungry! And Satan says, “how about turning these stones into bread”. But I don’t think Satan was trying to woo Jesus into making Wonder Bread. I don’t even think that filling His empty stomach was the primary temptation here. No. I think Satan’s motivation was much more devious than that. Which is also often the case!

Jesus was Fasting, remember, immediately following His Baptism, and just prior to the beginning of His Ministry. I think He was Fasting as a Spiritual Discipline, in order to stay connected with His Heavenly Father. He is in an intentional time of intimate conversation with Almighty God! That’s when Satan comes along and tries to distract Him away! “Here, think about yourself instead. Concentrate on your empty stomach Jesus, not on God! You’re hungry, right? How about turning these stones into bread!”

Now think about that. How many times has that, or something similar happened to you? You are working hard, maybe even real-hard on your personal relationship with the Lord. When suddenly, as if out of the blue, the enemy cranks up his attacks into high gear.

I also think that this particular attack was targeting Jesus’ humility. “If you really are the Son of God,” the enemy says. Or, “Since you are the Son of God”. “Since you are someone of such obvious noble status,” “Since you are such a big shot, so important, above all this,” “then why not turn these stones into bread!” Your Father did something like that for Moses, you know, out in the desert, with the Manna. The Children of Israel were blessed by a miracle, directly from the Hand of God. They were given bread, when they were hungry, out in the wilderness. Why don’t you do the same thing!

I mean, you are the Son of God, right? If you really are who you say you are, then claim your authority Jesus. Do a miracle just like your Father did, for Heaven's sake! Publically declare who you are! Go ahead! That is, if you really are the Son of God! Do something amazing! Show us right now! Prove it!

Can you see the distraction here, the subtle temptation to "miss the mark"? Can you see the enticement, the plan to deflect Jesus away from His intended path? "Forget about that silly idea of the Cross, Jesus. Just step-up and declare who you are right now. Demand what is rightfully yours, immediately! You deserve the honor and glory right now! That is, if you really are the Son of God."

Years ago, when I would read this passage, I'd think, "what would be wrong with turning those stones into bread?" It'd be a good thing, wouldn't it? I mean, what could possibly be wrong with creating enough food to feed all of the hungry people of the world? Out of stones, no less! And with just the snap of Jesus' fingers! There are lots of stones in the Middle East, you know. There could be a superabundance of food for everyone!

You wouldn't have to worry about draughts or floods, forest fires or tornadoes. The wheat blight in Asia wouldn't even apply, nor the over-fishing in the North Atlantic! You wouldn't have to worry about low crop yield, or frost on the fruit trees, or the disappearance of honey bees! That Olive oil shortage in Italy wouldn't even apply! There would always be more than enough food!

Just think, no more need for “Week of Compassion”, or “World Vision”, or “Feed the Children”! No more concern over methane from all the cattle! No more wars over arable land! If only Jesus would just turn those stones into bread!

And think about how many of our greatest world concerns would simply “go away”, if Jesus ruled all of the kingdoms of the earth? What could possibly be better than that? Can you think of a more benevolent ruler? Can you imagine anyone more just? Can you think of anybody more qualified to fix the world economic issues, or to create world peace?

Heck, I’ll bet He could even get all the folks in Washington to get along! If Jesus had complete authority, we would have no more politics, no more political campaigns, no more yard signs, or the commercials that go along with them! Overnight government corruption would vanish! No more Putin! No more invasion of Ukraine! Think of the suffering, and oppression, and devastation that would be eliminated if Jesus was the Leader of the World! How is that bad? Isn’t that a temptation you could live with?

And what could possibly be wrong with Jesus throwing Himself down from the highest point of the Temple? He wouldn’t get hurt! He is Jesus! That would clearly demonstrate to everyone that He is the Son of God, right! Even the atheists and the agnostics would have to sit-up and take notice! Think about it! As His descent miraculously slows, and His feet gently touch the ground, all of Jerusalem would boldly proclaim who He really is! How could that be bad?

And right here, right in the middle of all this “stinking thinking”, is where the malice in the Devil’s temptation really lays! And right here is where I think we need to sit up and pay attention. You see, we are rarely tempted to do something “bad”, versus do something “good”. Oh, that happens from time-to-time. But that’s not something that blindsides us. No, most temptations are subtle, they come in the form of distractions. We are tempted to do something “good”, but at the expense of doing something “better”. Through Satan’s schemes, we are tempted to “settle” for something less. And then, actually miss out on what’s “best”!

Had Jesus chosen, for example, to spend His time and energy feeding the hungry—or had He chosen to use His gifts to right all of the socio-economic woes of the world—then there never would have been a Cross. And therefore, no Salvation through it. If Jesus had chosen to make a public proclamation of who He really is—demonstrating His power by throwing Himself off of the parapets of the Temple wall—then no one would be saved “through faith”. If Jesus had done that, His identity, as the Son of God, would have been blatantly obvious, right, a matter of public record. No need for Faith! Ephesians 2:8 says though, “It is by Grace that you have been saved, through Faith”. So, if Jesus had taken the bait, all of humanity would be lost! Utterly hopeless!

That’s the malice in temptation. We might be distracted by something “harmful” or “bad”. It’s easy to do. But it’s even easier to get distracted by something “good”. It’s also easier to justify a choice like that. But it comes at a price. You miss out on the “better”, or worse, miss out on the “best”!

I don't see this lesson as a narrative on Jesus overcoming worldly temptations. "I won! Game over! I resisted the devil's schemes!" And I don't picture the angels lining up along the halls of Heaven, applauding and cheering because of His earthly victory in the desert! This isn't about Jesus passing some kind of life-test either! In fact, I don't see it as an earthly battle at all! What I see here, is a Spiritual battle, even though there are potential earthly rewards involved. Which is why we need to pay attention!

Our battles are Spiritual too, you see, even though they also involve earthly rewards. And we too always have a choice—a choice between "right" and "wrong"—or more importantly, a choice between "the good" and "the best". So, our choices then, need to be made carefully, don't they? And with Eternity in mind! Which to me is the biggest lesson is this text!

Notice that we see Jesus staying connected with His Heavenly Father throughout this encounter—by prayer and study, and with Spiritual Disciplines, such as Fasting. We know that He was brought up in a believing home as well, trained in the ways of Faith. And that as an adult, He was Baptized to fulfill all righteousness. We see the Spirit of God descending on Him, as He comes up out of the Baptismal waters. And He was "full of the Spirit" and "led by the Spirit", or "driven by the Spirit, out into the desert"! Jesus stayed connected with the Father through all this! God was with Him, even in the midst of temptation, even in the midst of the wilderness! But notice, that even though Jesus was doing all the right things, and even though he was without sin, temptation came anyway!

Make no mistake, Trials and Temptations are not, some kind of punishment. The darts of the enemy are not only thrown at the wicked and the wrong. In fact, it's often just the opposite. The more closely you walk with the Lord, the more likely you are to be attacked. Think about it. Why would Satan need to distract you, if you were not on the right path?

So, Temptations are going to come. You can count on it. They will come at you when you are out in the desert, alone, when you are hungry and weak. And they will come at you when you are right-smack-dab in the middle of Paradise too, like Adam and Eve. They were well-fed, if you recall, and taken care of. But they were tempted anyway.

Temptation might come in physical ways—stones made into bread, in order to fill your empty stomach—or fruit hanging on a tree, that God has told you that you shouldn't go near. It may come in the form of stroking your ego. “You truly deserve all these kingdoms and their riches. And you can have them, if you just bow down and worship me!” Or your temptations may even come in the form of doubts—doubts in yourself, who you are—or doubts in your God, who He is! “If you really are the Son of God, then just throw yourself down and prove it”! But temptations are going to come.

You will be tempted to take your eyes off of God even, just for a moment. You will be distracted from the truth, and encouraged to focus only on yourself. You may be blindsided, or you may see it coming from a long-ways off. But it is going to happen!

And when it does, you will be given a choice! It's up to you though, to make the right one! Which is why we need to be prepared! Jesus quoted Scripture, in order to help in His time of need. He knew it well, and had it right at His fingertips. That's clearly a powerful lesson in this text! Notice though that the Enemy did too. Which means we need to be discerning, as well! Satan will twist the Word, and make it say what he wants it to say! That's another really common trick! It's used by Satan and his minions all the time!

So, we need to study it, don't we? We need to know it well. We need to understand Scripture, and wrestle with it. We need to be immersed in the Word, not just wade into it periodically, and only into the parts that we like, or feel are safe. "The Word" needs to be "near you", as it says in our reading from Romans! "In your mouth, and in your heart"! That is the absolute best line of defense you can have for dealing with temptation!

And we need to stand up for what's right! Always! Always stand up for what is right! There is a lot of "silence" happening in our world today, as well as silencing of opposing views—all in an effort to be inclusive, or politically correct. But isn't even that doing the "good" at the expense of the "best"? Leonardo Di Vinci once said, "He who does not punish evil, commands it to be done". I would add, "He or she who doesn't point it out, allows evil to continue"! And then there are the words of a great, local theologian, Wayne Margetson, who shares one of my favorite quotes of all time! "What one generation tolerates the next generation embraces!" Stand up for what is right. After all, that's what Jesus did. And all of God's People said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and Almighty God, we gather together in your Name. We come into this Fellowship of Love just as you have created us to be, side-by-side and hand-in-hand. We assemble in Worship, as a Community, as One Body, as a Powerful Force for your Glory and Honor! And we ask you to Bless us to be a Blessing to others, in your Name!

Father, we have just journeyed through the gift of this past week, and are preparing ourselves for yet another. We have begun Lent, and are Drawn now to the Cross. We are reflecting on “who we are” during this season, but also on “who we belong to”. So, we ask you for strength to run when we must, and the peace to rest when we may, and for wisdom to discern between the two. Help us to rise when we stumble or fall. Help us to finish the race that you have called us to run, and to glorify you with every step we take.

Lord, sometimes we find ourselves lonely on our journey, in the wilderness really, sometimes even quite lost. Please take our hands in these moments, and guide our paths. Help us to feel you close, and to be filled with your strength and support. Steady us Lord, and point us in the right direction again. Give us the courage to make the right choices. And help us to help others do the same.

As we walk with you today, Lord, and through this season of Lent, help us to resist the distractions. Help us to keep the Faith, and to see those who are lost and wandering. Empower us to speak a word of direction and encouragement their way. Help us to lift them up before you in our daily prayers. Grant us the power to pray in Jesus’ Name, for healing and guidance and peace in the lives of others. And quicken us Lord, to lift up before you those who are in need. Right now, we pray for.....We entrust these loved ones into your care, praying in the way that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...