

**Turn These Stones into Bread**     **Timothy L. Carson**  
**Matthew 4:1-4**                      **October 15, 2017**

Stones. We've been talking about them a lot the past few weeks, in particular in relation to our understanding of God in life. We have this foundation that is as sturdy as a stone. Out of this foundation springs water for the journey. Out of seeming weakness we discover strength. When the waters roar and foam we have something to stand on, we are grounded, our feet secure.

Today we turn a corner in our series and the stone stories we have chosen from the Bible take on a different metaphorical function. These stones are more about *spiritual practice*.

Our story this morning is taken from the temptation story of Jesus. At the entre of his ministry, just following his baptism, Jesus retreats to the wilderness, the space between the spaces, and he fasts and prays. At the end of the long fast, famished, he is tempted to turn aside from his quest, his devotion, and his determination.

The temptation is such an elemental one because it is connected to our survival instinct. "Turn these stones into bread," says the tempter. In other words, turn aside from the difficult path in order to satisfy your most basic needs. Turn aside from the difficult and important to the more comfortable and secure. Allow yourself to be driven by your security needs more than the important cause that demands everything of you.

How basic this is. We all know that a balanced life requires the meeting of certain fundamental needs: food, water, shelter, safety, health. These all dwell in Mazlow's lowest level of the hierarchy. Without these not much else matters.

Puerto Rico is a good example. Unless they can secure clean water, food, shelter, electricity to power everything from freezers to hospitals, other things don't matter much.

The temptation for Jesus is to set aside his quest for God in order to tend to his creaturely needs. That all seems so normal, doesn't it?

Remember, this has been a voluntary fast. He has entered in with eyes and heart open. It has not been imposed on him through poverty, disaster, drought or famine. Rather, it is a battle of the spirit.

At its most fundamental level this temptation pits our desire and willingness to pursue the highest good that is rock hard against a lesser path that is easier. And that choice repeats itself over and over as we walk the Christian path. We are always tempted to the easier, and we often concede.

Sometimes we turn the rock of the hard way toward the bread of the easy way through simply giving up. Our idealism wears out. Our patience gives out. We can't go forward without some success. Our creature needs and comforts call out to us.

But other times, urgent times, the choice is not part of a gradual process. It appears in a moment of great urgency and we must decide. It is either this or that, and we must decide. As the old hymn goes, "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide ..."

This fall at least three of our small groups in the church are studying the life and writings of the late German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As you may know, Bonhoeffer lived in Germany in the years leading up to and through the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich. He was part of the Christian resistance, the Confessing Church, the underground church, writing and speaking against the ideology, policies, and atrocities infecting Germany and compromising the German church. Bonhoeffer was executed just before the end of the war by order of Adolf Hitler for being part of a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. The order came just before Hitler took his own life and the life of his family.

During those years Bonhoeffer was faced with many stone or bread choices. Each one of those choices required moral clarity and spiritual courage.

The first and earliest temptation was to go with the state Lutheran church and simply adopt the Nazi ideology and Nazification of the church. But he would not turn that stone of conviction into easy bread; he became a leader in the resistance.

The next temptation was to be silent in the face of the genocide of the Jews. He refused to turn the stone of justice into the bread of timidity and wrote and spoke against the persecution of Jewry, equating it to the crucifixion of Christ.

The next temptation was to flee the conflict, taking safe haven in America until it was all over. As a matter of fact it was arranged that Bonhoeffer would do just that, assuming a teaching post at Union Seminary in New York. After seventeen days of soul-searching in New York, he decided that he could not abandon his people in their greatest hour of need; he could not run from the fight. He sailed back to Germany on the last ship out of harbor before war was declared. He returned to the stone of Germany, leaving behind the bread of America.

The next temptation was to take safe haven in piety, separating religious life from moral action in the world. He discovered that the stone of faith could only be discovered by living fully in the world and striving to do God's will in those present circumstances. Christians cannot escape to the easy

bread of isolation. Nor can they escape the concrete demands which are placed before them and what faith requires in those concrete situations.

After Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, he made a decision that he would not allow himself to fall into despair and hopelessness. Rather, he would stand on the rock of faith, reading scripture, praying, reaching out to other prisoners and guards, rather than collapsing into the easier bread of helplessness and passivity.

Since Bonhoeffer's uncle was the commandant of all military style prisons in Germany, the guards sometimes favored him and catered to him, giving him more food or freedoms than others. On several occasions Bonhoeffer refused the literal bread of ease, choosing instead the rock of deprivation – because he knew that his being favored – even with more food – would mean less for fellow prisoners.

At one point the guards had orchestrated an escape plan for Bonhoeffer. Just before the day came to execute the plan, his brother, Claus, was arrested

and imprisoned, and at the last minute Dietrich decided not to escape because he knew that that his brother and family would pay the price and be mistreated on account of his escape. He chose the stone of love for them rather than the bread of freedom.

And in the end, as he faced his death, he chose the rock of faith and trust in God rather than the fear and desperation of a man who had no hope. He saw his way through the suffering and the temptation to a lesser path by trusting God and the ultimate hope of living with God forever. His last words to his executioner: "I forgive you. You send me to God."

Now I know what you may be thinking and feeling: I am not Bonhoeffer and I am not living in such an urgent time as that. Well, you are not Bonhoeffer, to be sure. But you are a Christian. You are not living in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, but you are living in your own time and place of history, replete with its own challenges. And all of us are continually poised between the stone which has been provided or the stone we have chosen and the

temptation to turn it into the bread of ease. What will we choose?

Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to be silent in the face of injustice and wrong. Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to compromise our values when the culture around us has gone mad. Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to choose our own privilege at the expense of others. Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to go through the motions of religious piety without responding to the real moral crisis in the land. Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to blur the lines between the state and the church. Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to protect ourselves while others are being persecuted. Like Bonhoeffer we are tempted to seek our own security when others are barely existing. Just like him we are always poised between the hard way of the stone and the temptation to turn that stone into bread, to choose the easier but not better way.

In each and every case we are called to make a decision, a decision to speak and act or not.

One of the interesting things about Bonhoeffer was that he knew how very partial is our virtue and how very mixed is our response. We make decisions as those walking through the fog without perfect clarity. But we decide as best we can, knowing in advance that we will not be perfect, rather depending on God's grace to make up the difference. We act before the situation is calm, resolved and peaceful; we act while the water is still muddy, discerning whatever we can in the moment.

Anyone can make choices in times of peace and ease. But are we ready, is our spiritual metal tempered and ready for the great trial when it is placed before us? What do we depend on then? To what do we turn when we make those urgent choices? How will we know and have the courage to not turn stone into bread, but to resist, stay the course, even when ten thousand voices swirl around us saying the opposite?

I know, you are not Jesus. And I also know that you are not Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Neither am I.

But what I do know is that each one of us is living in the wilderness. And the temptation is ever near: Will we abandon the hard way of the stone and turn aside instead to the easier way of bread. And only you and your God can answer that.