

First Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2020

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**Genesis 2: 15-17, 3:1-7**

**Matthew 4: 1-11**

**Active Looking: Encounters with Jesus**



Charles Burchfield, *Sun and Rocks*

This is the first Sunday in Lent and we begin by launching our Lenten series, Encounters with Jesus, at the start of Jesus' ministry. You have heard the story...following his baptism Jesus heads to the wilderness for 40 days and nights where he is tempted by Satan. (Let's stop for a minute and recognize that the use of "Satan" here represents anything from the personification of the devil, to evil, to visions, depending upon which commentary you read. For our purposes I am sticking with the term Satan, allowing for whatever spin you want to put on it. The important thing is that Jesus is driven to encounter evil; the first "encounter with Jesus," then, is Satan's.)

No sooner is Jesus out of the waters of his baptism at the Jordan than he begins to be tempted to use his super powers. For Jesus those powers were implicitly imparted to him by God with the pronouncement that everyone present heard, *This is my beloved son....* He essentially was tempted to focus upon himself and to use that focus to prove and enhance who he was...the Son of God... no matter what the cost. Notice that Satan's temptations begin with a cynical and taunting challenge: "So...if you are the Son of God..." then prove it. Jesus didn't feel the need to do that whether it was about nourishment or ego...didn't feel compelled to prove anything... so Satan tries to bribe him with an "if/then" proposition. "If you worship me...then I'll give you authority over everything in this world." Jesus holds fast to Scripture, refuses, and Satan relents. Jesus continues on into his ministry.

The period of Lent that we began at Ash Wednesday this last week often includes a time of fasting and prayer...the activities Jesus was thought to be engaging in in the Wilderness. This origin sets the stage for the custom of many to give up something for Lent. Typically, we choose those things that are insignificant but most tempting to us: coffee, chocolate, alcohol, sugar, etc. There is a long list. We Presbyterians don't advertise it much but some do participate...the goal being to somehow invest in a trial of commitment and fasting...to experience what it means to resist temptation for a period of time.

Wesley Allen, Alabama preacher, believes that this Lenten model is a kind of discipline that calls us to abstain from these inconsequential things in our lives for a fixed amount of time so that we will be tempted to want it even more...and to grow persistent and skilled in resisting it. He calls it "temptation practice"...kind of a rehearsal for the time when serious temptation enters our lives...in other words, taking on small disciplines so that we are prepared for the need for real self-discipline when a big temptation comes along. He even gives an example saying that, "Lent

is like intentionally letting yourself get bitten by mosquitoes so that you will practice resisting the temptation to scratch so that, when you get poison ivy which REALLY itches...which you will in Alabama...you can be ready.” I don’t know. I’m from Florida and I think I’ve heard that story there too.

Research tells us that temptations are driven by the rewards one gets when giving in to temptation. You know that saying, “I can resist anything but temptation,” probably applies here. Some rewards can be great...like dark chocolate or scratching.

There are any number of directions to go with this text, and preachers have. I have, at other times...addressing all of Jesus’ temptations to hedonism (pleasure seeking), ego, and materialism. Or one could spend the entire time looking at Jesus’ self-sacrificing as a way of helping *us* avoid having to deal with these temptations. Essentially, though, I think Jesus’ temptation, at the heart of it, is about one thing: he is being tempted to act in a way that denies his identity as God’s child. Further, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ being the Son of God is not just about his identity but also his mission. They are bound together. Jesus comes from God in order to serve God’s people. The temptation that he encounters in the wilderness, then, is to deny his being God’s child AND to turn his back on the call he received at baptism.

You and I have received a similar legacy ... we are God’s children, and we each have a mission to accomplish, a call to serve. So for this sermon’s purposes about temptations and Lent, I’ve decided to narrow our focus down to a very specific temptation that plagues us; actually, especially at this time in our society, and tempts us to act in ways other than as children of God. It is the temptation that goes directly counter to Jesus’ commandment that we love one another (maybe the biggest denial of our identity there is?). It is the temptation to judge others/assume things about those around us based upon, sometimes, appearance alone or circumstance alone... and then, sometimes, to act on those assumptions in not just offending but harmful ways. When we give into that temptation it is like cheating on being a Christian.

I’ve recently coined a concept in my writing, calling it “active looking”. Different from “active listening” which emphasizes the importance of listening intently so that one hears clearly what another is saying, active looking involves seeing beyond and through what is initially visible or apparent. I believe that Jesus was engaged in active looking when he encountered Satan in these temptations. He saw through the appeal and glamor of the enticements to the cost of a decision to comply with Satan’s temptations: cost to himself and, being Jesus, to others ultimately. Recognize, too, tempting though it might have been, Jesus’ recourse when tempted by Satan was not to judge him but to ground himself in God’s word in Scripture and in his commitment to God.

Assumptions based on appearance do not reveal the story or the character of a person. “Active looking” goes beyond what is on the surface and seeks to see the essential gifts in each of us. Active looking is especially important for those for whom challenges are immediately apparent: disabilities, handicaps, physical deformities, and mental and spiritual challenges that mold a person’s image.

Quick and judgmental conclusions can cause us to overlook the gift within someone who seems disadvantaged because of differences whether those are from birth, accident, trauma or place of origin. Clearly these include people with chronic physical handicaps, mental illness; foreigners, immigrants, and religious beliefs other than our own.

Malcom Gladwell, in his book, David and Goliath, describes two sets of advantages: ones that have to do with material resources, and ones with the absence of material resources. We tend to identify with the former and judge the latter. We strive to accumulate resources and may be tempted to look down upon or consider ourselves superior to those who lack them in various forms including physical and mental appearance and health, education and social status. Sometimes, even our sympathy can set us apart...place a distance called "have" and "have not" which can allow judgment to creep in. In so doing, we deprive others and ourselves of gifts that are powerful resources. Says Gladwell, "There is a set of advantages that have to do with material resources, and there is a set that have to do with the absence of material resources- and the reason underdogs win as often as they do is that the latter is sometimes every bit the equal of the former."

At Woods, as you know, we work very hard to serve ALL in the name of Jesus Christ. It is in our identity as children of God and in our calling.

A son took his father to a restaurant for an evening dinner.

Father being very old and weak, while eating, dropped food on his shirt and trousers.

Other diners watched him in disgust while his son was calm.

After he finished eating, his son who was not at all embarrassed, quietly took him to the wash room, wiped the food particles, removed the stains, combed his hair and fitted his spectacles firmly. When they came out, the entire restaurant was watching them in dead silence, not able to grasp how someone could embarrass themselves publicly like that.

The son settled the bill and started walking out with his father.

At that time, an old man amongst the diners called out to the son and asked him, "Don't you think you have left something behind?"

The son replied, "No sir, I haven't."

The old man retorted, "Yes, you have! You left a lesson for every son and hope for every father."

The restaurant went silent.

Jesus spent his lifetime, his ministry, in active looking...seeing through cascades and superficiality to the real person. He saw gifts within each person he encountered...people who others shunned and devalued and overlooked whether they be mentally challenged or lepers or outcasts in society. He actively looked beyond what was immediately apparent to people's hearts and intentions. THAT'S how he proved he was the Son of God.

As God's children, we are tempted to judge others and overlook the gifts that are hidden by outward appearance. This Lent let's not be tempted to deny either our lives as God's people or the callings to service given to us. Let us begin actively looking directly at what and who may initially cause us to look away.

Let's give up judgement, critical assumptions and condemning attitudes for Lent and begin the journey to Easter. Each time we do we will likely encounter Jesus himself.