



Lent 2: February 25, 2018 St. Christopher's Church West Vancouver

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

From Mark's Gospel:

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This last week I've asked people a lot of questions about temptation.

"What are your temptations?" I've asked some. "What's your understanding of temptation" I've asked others.

After a fair amount of understandable silence in response to both of these questions, this is some of what I heard:

"My temptation has to do with food," someone said.

"My temptation is checking my phone all the time," another person said.

"My temptation has to do with power and control," another person said.

"My temptation is avoiding things that I don't want to deal with," still another person said.

"My temptation is holding onto the people I love too tightly," someone said.

And in response to my second question about how people understand temptation, I got this very astute comment: "temptation is choosing to do something that *seems* appealing but in reality turns life to, well, something I can't mention to you, Bishop. Temptation," he went on to say "is wanting to bite an apple that we will discover is rotten at the core."

The Gospel of Mark takes temptation very seriously. Last Sunday, we heard that after his baptism, Jesus was driven out into the desert to be tempted by Satan, and in this week's reading we hear Jesus using the name of Satan again. This time Jesus calls Peter "Satan" after Peter rejects Jesus' disclosure to the disciples that he must be rejected, suffer and die in his role as the Messiah of God.

"Get behind me, Satan," Jesus says to Peter, "for you are setting your mind on human things, not on divine things."

The word used for temptation in the book of Mark means *testing*. In other words, a temptation is an experience in which we discover who we are by the choices we make. And, I would add, out of these choices, we take one more step down a path toward who we might become.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and then later in his conversation with Peter, was the temptation to turn away from the struggle and conflict that would come to him as he fulfilled his vocation as the Messiah of God. Another way of saying this is that his temptation was to take up a life that would not cost him his life—to, for instance, settle for being a more conventional teacher peacefully surrounded by his disciples, or, on the other hand to more fully embrace the kind of Messiahship that the Jewish people were longing for—a Messiah who would come with great power to overthrow the oppressive rule of the Romans.

But as Mark tells it, both in the wilderness and in his conversation with Peter, Jesus doesn't take the bait of the possibility of living a life away from the suffering and struggle of what it meant to be the kind of Messiah that God called him to be. And what is more, he tells his followers not to take the bait either: "If any want to become my followers," Jesus says, "let them...take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life...will save it." In other words, Jesus is saying to them that they too will need to suffer and struggle in order to fulfill their vocations, they will need to lose some things, to let some things go in order to find the life they are meant to live.

This, of course, is hard stuff for us. For if you're at all like me you yearn not to struggle, not to have to lose something, to let something go, in order to find your life. And this, of course, is what our temptations like to promise us—they promise us a way out of the struggle at least for a little while but what they really do is to undermine our relationship with ourselves or with others. What they really do is to subvert our realization of the vocations each of us is called to claim. And so to return to my conversations with people about their temptations:

- We are tempted to fill up on food or drink as a way to put off the struggle with the emptiness that is simply a part of being human
- We are tempted to scroll through email or look at social media sites rather than struggle with what it might mean to come back to ourselves, to what we might productively do with our time
- We are tempted to stay in a position of power rather than suffer the awkwardness and vulnerability of being on an equal footing with others
- We are tempted to avoid doing *this or that* rather than struggle with facing into what we might dread
- We are tempted to hold onto people tightly rather than suffering the fear that comes with letting the people we love go to make their own choices

There is a story a monk whose name was Abba John that gets at our desire to avoid our inner struggles and where it can lead us. Abba John was a man of many internal struggles which he lived with and worked on for many years. One day he had an idea. He began to pray to God to take all his internal struggles away so that he might become serene, peaceful and free from care. He prayed and prayed and prayed. After a while he felt a strange new sense of peace descend upon him. And so he went and, with a new sense of self-satisfaction, told one of the elders: "I find myself at peace with myself and with the world."

The elder was silent for a time, and the elder said to him, "Then go and beseech God to stir up struggle within you so that you may regain the affliction and the humility that you used to have, for it is by struggle that the soul makes progress. So Abba John prayed to God again inviting his struggles to return and when the struggles came, he no longer prayed that they might be taken away. Instead he said, "Lord, give me strength for the struggle." And "Lord, give me the wisdom and the healing that you bring me through the struggle."

Today at St. Christopher's we're confirming two people and reaffirming the baptismal faith of a third person. While we might want to promise these three, spiritual lives that are free from struggle, this is not at all what we will be offering them today. Instead we're offering

them companions in the real struggles of their lives, the real struggles they will encounter as they try to listen to the voice of God inviting them ever more deeply into their own humanity and vocations as baptized Christians. And we're offering them a new closeness to a Messiah and Lord who feeds us all with broken bread and spilled wine—the tokens of his own life of struggle, a life that was tested and tried and that opens for us a path to new life.