

On Temptation and the New Baptist Covenant

The Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, tell us that Jesus was in the wilderness, fasting and being tested for forty days and forty nights. It is a significant period of time in the Bible, carrying with it both an air of completeness and connections to other events when human beings have experienced a time of trial. Noah and his family were in the ark while it rained for forty days and forty nights. Moses fasted for forty days and nights in order to receive the Law from Yahweh upon the mountain. Elijah fasted for forty days and nights during his journey to Mount Horeb, where he heard God as a still, small voice. Ezekiel, perhaps the world's first performance artist, lay on his right side in the public square before a model of the city of Jerusalem for forty days to symbolize God's judgment against Judah. But perhaps the most familiar connection of Jesus' forty day fast, both to his contemporaries and to us, is the forty years that the Children of Israel spent in the wilderness before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land.

That idea of wilderness wandering registers strongly with many Baptists. From the earliest days of Anabaptists in Europe and Baptists in England and America, we have been a people outside of the structures of the Established Church, the brand of Christianity most recognized by both populace and government. In many places, Baptists were literally cast out into what Roger Williams, America's first Baptist, famously called "the howling wilderness." We have been equally ruthless amongst ourselves, banishing or fleeing from each other over questions of theology and practice that seem pathetically small or tragically misguided in retrospect. Here in America, we did have a brief stay in the promised land of denominational peace and unity but it lasted less than forty years, making only about thirty from the formation of the Triennial Convention in 1814 to its split over the issue of whether missionaries could own slaves in 1845. We have had more than four times forty years of increasing fragmentation since then; perhaps our wilderness wanderings are more extended than those of the Children of Israel because we have more to learn about following God's will. In the past eighty years, the pace of fragmentation has increased with large-scale defections from the major bodies both Northern and Southern over various expressions of the issue of fundamentalism. It has been a little over thirty years since the fundamentalist faction began their campaign to seize control of the decision-making process of America's largest Baptist body, nearly twenty since that effort culminated in the purging of the seminaries and missions boards, plunging a significant number of Baptists into their own "wandering in the wilderness" experience.

At first, most of those wanderers chose to huddle together among themselves for comfort and solace. New quasi-denominational bodies sprang up in Baptist life in the United States: The Alliance of Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Texas Baptists Committed. But about two years ago, a small group of Baptist leaders, both lay and clergy, began to dream and plan together of a gathering of all Baptists who were willing to come and celebrate what brings us together rather than what separates us. They drew up a short document which they called the New Baptist Covenant. It says:

"We Baptists of North America covenant together to:

- Create an authentic and prophetic Baptist voice for these complex times,
- Emphasize traditional Baptist values, including sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for public and private morality, and

On Temptation and the New Baptist Covenant

- Promote peace with justice, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and marginalized, welcome the strangers among us, and promote religious liberty and respect for religious diversity.”

The meeting that those 18 Baptists dreamed up took place last week in Atlanta, Georgia, and estimates of attendance (registration was not mandatory) range up to 15,000. The thirty organizations who participated in the planning and execution of the meeting represent over 20 million Baptists in North America. Those of us in attendance felt like the Israelites at the end of their forty years, that we had surely glimpsed the promised land.

But we were also reminded during the plenary sessions, which featured amazing preaching, testimonies and music, as well as during the well-led special interest sessions, that we have a lot of work to do to bring our society close to the Kingdom of God. As I read our Scripture for this morning during the course of the week, some of the things that I heard in Atlanta, some of the things that I've been reading in the past few weeks and the story of Jesus' temptations all came together for me in a way that I hope will make some sense. The trials that Jesus overcame in the desert are in many ways the same trials that the Body of Christ, the Church, and each of us individually as its members must overcome today.

The first paradigmatic temptation overcome by Jesus was that to turn stones into bread, to give up a fast for the Lord in order to fill a hungry belly, to place physical desire over spiritual quest. Many Christians around the world are remembering this temptation in particular during the Lenten season as they give up some physical pleasure in order to focus their hearts and minds upon following Jesus more closely. It is a practice which I have followed myself from time to time and I recommend it. But I think it is important to remember that the tempter's suggestion to Jesus in the desert and Jesus' reply have deeper implications. As I've said here before, the temptation to use his miraculous powers to create food must have surely resonated with Jesus as he considered the vast number of poor and hungry people in his native land. But there are only two stories in the New Testament of Jesus feeding people through a miracle and on both occasions the physical feeding came only after the crowd had stayed all day, hungrily consuming the words of life.

It is a good reminder to us that while we are called to feed the hungry, to fill the physically empty with real, nourishing food, we cannot forget that those with empty stomachs also have empty hearts as well. Nor are we to use food, clothing, shelter or other necessities of physical life as a lure to entice the hungry to hear our Good News. As a young actor, I was involved in a production of George Bernard Shaw's "Major Barbara" that was memorable to me for many reasons. Late in the play, the character Andrew Undershaft points out the flaw in the work of his daughter, Barbara, with the Salvation Army: "It is cheap work converting starving men with a Bible in one hand and a slice of bread in the other... Try your hand on my men: their souls are hungry because their bodies are full." We are called by Jesus to work always to alleviate the plight of the poor, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless. But we cannot do it as part of a bargain for spiritual salvation, nor can we forget to address the spiritual needs once the physical needs are met.

On Temptation and the New Baptist Covenant

My friend Kevin Nollette, pastor of Edmonds Presbyterian Church, made a wise observation in this regard at the meeting of the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association on Wednesday. “The Earthling,” he said, pointing to both the Hebrew root of the word Adam and the Latin root of the word human, “the Earthling was made out of the mud; we are part of the Earth. But he only became a living soul when God breathed spirit into him.” Simply put, we must remember both the physical and spiritual needs of our neighbors. I believe that the New Baptist Covenant takes both of these calls seriously in its promise to both “(share) the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for public and private morality” and to “Promote peace with justice, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and marginalized, welcome the strangers among us, and promote religious liberty and respect for religious diversity.” There was much more focused talk during the meeting about the latter calling than the former. One of the failings of the Church over time has been that various groups of us have veered strongly to one side or the other, meeting physical needs or meeting spiritual needs, rarely managing to keep an appropriate balance. During our time together in Atlanta, Charlie Scalise pointed me toward an incident in Baptist history that I knew little about. In the late 1700’s, General Baptists in Britain had lost their theological distinctives and were fading into obscurity as a nice group of people who did good things for others. But a new connection with the robust spiritual emphasis of the Methodists led by John and Charles Wesley revitalized those who adopted the name “New Connection Baptists” and they were the basis for what became the Baptist Union of Great Britain around one hundred years later, giving the British Baptists a unity that Baptists in America have failed to attain. Concern for the physical and concern for the spiritual met and formed a solid foundation, built on the rock of Jesus.

Jesus, it seems, was right all along. “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” If we are truly to live up to our calling and to that New Baptist Covenant, we must carry both bread and the word to our neighbors, as well as making sure that our own diets, both physical and spiritual, are healthy. We have in this book that which we have affirmed as the word of God. Do we consume enough of it each week, each day to stay healthy? When we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” do we remember that the physical bread must be accompanied by the spiritual bread to keep us healthy? Not only have Baptists historically held up the Bible as the word of God but we also affirm the teachings of the Bible that tell us that Jesus is the Word of God, God’s creative force that created and sustains the world. Jesus is our Creator and Sustainer and he is, by his own claim, the Bread of Life. As we move forward as the local Body of Christ called Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we must remember our calling to make sure that our neighbors have plenty of the bread of the field and of the Bread of Heaven.

Although I’ve read from Matthew’s Gospel this morning, I want to follow Luke’s example and address the tempter’s offer of worldly power next. Matthew writes, “The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”” One of the topics addressed at the New Baptist Covenant meeting was the historical Baptist cause of the separation of Church and State. We were reminded in both break-out sessions and in plenary sermons that religious liberty is part of our Baptist heritage, derived from Jesus call to us to love our neighbor. It has become tempting for Baptists, as we have grown from a tiny

On Temptation and the New Baptist Covenant

minority to the largest Protestant group in America, to ignore that historic distinctive and to work to bend the nation to our will. But Jesus rejected temporal power over and over again. “My kingdom,” he told Pilate, “is not of this world.” Nor is the kingdom that Jesus’ followers pray for of this world. It will come as no surprise to any of you that I believe it is right and good for Christians to seek to serve their neighbors in government service, elected or appointed, but we are not to substitute faith in the state or in any of the world’s systems for our faith in our God and in God’s Christ. The word of the Lord came to the prophet Isaiah, in the first verse of the 31st chapter of that book: “Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!” Psalm 33 says, “No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.”

The South Snohomish Ministerial Association, which I mentioned earlier, is a group of pastors, chaplains and other ministers who meet once a month and, for the past year or so, have been focusing on reading and discussing books together. We’re currently working on Brian McLaren’s book, Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope. In it, McLaren suggests that in order to fully follow the way of Jesus, we must reject our culturally-taught allegiance to the world’s systems, including the Prosperity System, the Security System and the Equity System. We do not have time this morning for me to do McLaren’s arguments justice (and I heartily recommend the book to all of you) but in essence McLaren is warning Christians that we have failed in the temptation to ally ourselves with the powers of the world rather than with the power of God. We live in the richest, most powerful nation in the world, but rather than use our riches and our might to address the very real problems plaguing our world, problems of hunger and want, problems of pollution and climate change, problems of genocide and brutality, we have allowed our nation to ignore or contribute to those problems while focusing on maintaining our own interests, in staying rich, in staying comfortable, in having all we want, while millions live in poverty, need and danger. As Americans, we have a wealth of natural resources and a governmental system that allows us to strive for justice, but we have built our success on the blood of this country’s original inhabitants and on the sweat of an enslaved minority and we continue to build our wealth on the poverty of other nations. We must repent, turn away from the systems of destruction, and take our place as leaders among the nations for freedom and compassion. We are the spiritual heirs of Abraham; we are to be a blessing to the nations. But thanks to our pursuit of the world’s wealth and comfort rather than the true peace that comes from the way of Jesus, we are feared and hated among the nations and the Good News which it is our charge to carry is seen as the bad news of domination and threat. My sisters and my brothers, this ought not to be.

“Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”” You know, the devil sort of has a point here. Jesus is the one human being who really is all that and a bag of chips and the devil wants him to act like it. Jesus declines. He will not fall into the trap of spiritual pride. I wonder if his followers can be as wise. Based on the history of Christian behavior, I fear not. I hope you good American Baptists don’t get too

On Temptation and the New Baptist Covenant

aggravated with my stories of the Southern Baptist Convention but it's what I grew up in and is a part of my life experience that I'm still trying to learn from and make sense of. So, one more story today. When the SBC was busy tearing itself apart in the Eighties, I kept my hope for denominational peace for as long as I could and consequently tried to understand the arguments of both sides. I found myself in agreement with the so-called "Moderate" party in terms of theology and adherence to traditional Baptist distinctives but there was one complaint voiced by the "Conservatives" or Fundamentalists that cut me to the quick. It was essentially this: "We haven't been treated right. Those "liberals" have been in charge too long and they won't even listen to us. Those smarty-pants seminary professors and their bunch treat us like stupid country bumpkins. They won't even invite us to the table." Now many of the folks they were inveighing against were friends of mine; trusted pastors and professors and mentors. I knew that the majority of them were loving and kind but I'd also seen some of them take the metaphorical hide off a student whose opinions they thought were not well-thought out or supported. Sometimes, academic rigor can look like and even become intellectual pride. And when the subject is theology, that can easily become spiritual pride. I don't believe that the shortcomings of some gave license to the destructive behavior that followed. But for me, it is a cautionary tale.

The tone of the meeting in Atlanta was set by former President Carter, who called in his opening remarks for "no criticism of others or exclusion of any Christians, now or in the future, who wish to join this cause." On the whole, his admonition was followed and there were two speakers in the plenary sessions who gave the ideas of peaceful co-existence with all Baptists special attention. Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia, spoke eloquently on the topic, "The Bible Speaks about Respecting Diversity." Respect, she said, is not a concept that goes far enough in expressing the will of God for how we treat each other. The Bible, she said, does not say that God so respected the world that He gave His only Son. The necessary word, the necessary attitude, is love. We must be ready to love each other in our diversity, to love even those who self-identify as our enemies.

There was another plenary session speaker who impressed me with a message warning against spiritual pride, who spoke with deep passion about what President Carter had called the "very powerful... temptation of self-exaltation." I was, to put it mildly, pleasantly surprised at the spiritual depth and power shown by this speaker. Many of us had discussed, earlier in the day, that we were concerned that former President Clinton would disrupt the tone of the proceedings. He had, after all, spent the previous week serving as "hatchet man" for his wife's presidential campaign, earning the opprobrium of the national press for his intemperate remarks. We were further concerned that he was playing a "star turn," not attending any of the sessions except for the one where he was to speak and arriving very late for that. I began to be disarmed when he explained that he was discarding the remarks prepared for him by his staff as too self-congratulatory and began to speak, slowly and carefully about his own Christian journey and what he had learned about the importance of humility.

Regardless of your opinion of President Clinton as a messenger, I hope you will listen closely as I tell you the core of his message, for I believe it addresses the key to overcoming the temptation of spiritual pride. Like Rev. Pennington-Russell, President Clinton spoke of love, quoting the final verse of I Corinthians 13: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Why did Paul put so much emphasis on love, Clinton asked us. The

On Temptation and the New Baptist Covenant

answer, he said, lies in the verse immediately preceding: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” He went on to remind us that no matter how much we may think we know, no matter how sincerely we may believe that we have the truth, those who hold the opposite opinion are just as certain and just as sincere. We must respect their sincerity and conviction even if we can’t agree and love them as brothers and sisters, for only God knows the whole truth.

In our narthex, hangs a framed poster. It says, “Good Shepherd Baptist Church welcomes the open sharing of a variety of Biblical interpretation and Christian expression. While accepting diversity of views, we affirm a deeper unity. This unity we seek is characterized by a spirit of sacrificial love extended toward all persons as members of a common and valued humanity, and respect for the dignity of each individual as an unduplicated child of God.” As long as we seek to live out those words, we will keep the temptation of self-exaltation and spiritual pride at bay.

There is a temptation to sell out the spirit for the sake of the body. Both in its selfish expression and in its seemingly altruistic guise, it is outside of the will of God. There is a temptation to abandon the Lordship of God to follow the powers of this world. We cannot serve both God and mammon. There is a temptation to raise ourselves to the pinnacle, to say “no doubt but we are the people and wisdom will die with us.” But only God knows the whole truth. To walk with Jesus, to make him Lord of our lives, to take seriously what it is to be a Christian, we must work every day to reject these temptations. It will be hard but Jesus is with us. Just as we are forgiven, so we will be empowered, given the sufficient grace to live our lives as Jesus would have us do. It is the gift of God to us. Thanks be to God.