

## The Temptation of Jesus

**4** Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil<sup>[a]</sup> led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil<sup>[b]</sup> said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.'"

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil<sup>[c]</sup> took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,'

<sup>11</sup>and

'On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

## First Fruits and Tithes

**26** When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup>You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup>you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

**Kerra Becker English**

**“To Testify in the Midst of a Sinful World”**

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-11**

**March 10, 2019**

Following the sermon today, we will be reading an affirmation of faith that comes from the Theological Declaration of Barmen. Barmen was written as a response to what was happening to the church in Germany in 1934. Those who congregated for the Synod that met in Barmen believed that the German Christian movement “had corrupted church government by making it subservient to the state and by introducing Nazi ideology into the German Protestant churches that contradicted the Christian gospel.” (Wikipedia) In the declaration, the part we will read together, Jesus Christ is the ONE word of God whom we are to hear and trust – not to give that power over to other earthly sources. Also, Jesus Christ has the power to forgive our sins and free us to live in grace. Therefore, we need no justification from other earthly lords or powers for our relationship with God. And as for the church, we are to “testify in the midst of a sinful world” with our faith and obedience, with our message and within our order, that we belong to Jesus Christ rather than being blown about the political ideologies or convictions of the day. It’s a powerful statement - one that put its adherents in danger from those who were busy consolidating the powers of church and state for their own means.

But one may wonder, why read this statement in an assembly of worship in 2019? You may be familiar with some of the oldest Christian confessions that we repeat with much greater frequency – like the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. You may be able to recall a few phrases from the much more recent and more poetic Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith that was written as a liturgical statement on the Trinity during the reunification of the Northern and

Southern streams of the Presbyterian church that formed the Presbyterian Church (USA). But why this one? Why now? Does Kerra just want to take a page from the History channel and give us a World War II documentary? Is this going to become another opportunity to compare every bad time in history either before or after that time period to the Nazis as political arguments like to do to get a rise out of their opposition?

No, what I really want to do is lift the Christ-centered message from this creed and remind us of its importance for all times and all places even as historically rooted as it was. I certainly have nothing redeeming to say about Nazi ideology, but what I do have to say is this, the church isn't done speaking truth to power just yet. We are still being called to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with our faith and obedience, with our message and within our order. There are those who would cry out that we are living in particularly horrific times now, and they wouldn't be wrong. Sometimes I can get blown away by the presence and power of evil in this world myself. But I dare say that there hasn't been a "before" and there won't be an "anytime soon" that we have any OTHER WORLD but a sinful world to live in. If that bursts your bubble, I'm sorry about that. There is no perfect order. The quest for perfection, the drive for purity has often come with huge flaws attached – especially when the vision of a perfect world relies on unity of race, or belief, or national identity to make it so. Whenever one names an authority or an identity as greater than Christ or seems to be able to name the one true interpreter of who God is, problems happen right quick.

This creed stands in history and in our tradition as a humbling of the church before God. We need that humbling because the temptations are so great. The temptation is always there to fall in line behind a charismatic persona and deem their powers much greater than they ought to have as a human being in the world. The temptation is great to align the might of the state with

the influence of the church to garner more attention, consolidate resources, and gain power. The Jesus who humbly rode into Jerusalem on a donkey has often been replaced by some version of a conquering hero Jesus arriving with sword flashing on a tall white steed. When the people that we hate become exactly the people God is supposed to hate, we have missed the notion completely that Jesus Christ blesses us over and over again with God's assurance of forgiveness, and that grace is a gift, freely given by the God who loves each and every one of us.

This humbling of the church in many ways parallels the humbling of Jesus as he is tempted in the wilderness. We don't think of Jesus as being humbled by the tempter, but we do see him showing impeccable restraint in receiving each of these mighty blows to any ego he may have had to begin with. The first temptation of course is hunger. He had been fasting for some time now, so the devil tells him he could easily turn a stone into a loaf of bread. The temptation of course isn't only about meeting a physical need, it's about the temptation to listen to our own hungers as greater than anyone else's, and then elevate our own desires into the selfish grab. Hungry for something? Take it. You know you want to. But there are times even our own hungers must be tempered in order for everyone to have enough.

The second temptation is the one that has great allure for any charismatic leader, spiritual or otherwise, and I have to believe that in this story, the temptation is real and extends even to Jesus himself. That's the allure of power, kingdoms, and glory. Believing that one can rise to rule over others and achieve the upper rungs of hierarchical power has led many astray. This is the egoistic temptation that fills stadium seating churches with people and money. It also the same pressure that keeps old institutional churches feeling powerful – even if they have to remember glory days past to keep that feeling going. Even sometimes with the best of intentions, a leader

will seek to impose his or her will over others. The devil promises it all - even if it means world peace – because the devil knows that such expressions of power are ultimately corrupting.

The final temptation is the encouragement to make God pick God's favorites. Go ahead, Jesus. Throw yourself down from the top of the temple. God won't let you get hurt. The angels will catch you if you fall. How many churches tend to test God in this way? They believe that God won't close their doors. That God favors their theology. That God wouldn't let their members get sick or be trouble-makers. The problem with this temptation is that it forgets that we can't help but live in a fallen world where life happens in a world of conflict, struggle, and disease, where competing interests set us up to forget about our better natures. It also forgets that we are more likely to think God picks favorites than seems to be the reality. I know we can talk about the chosen people. We can talk about Jesus' title as God's son. And yet, God doesn't seem all that interested in playing human games about who Mom liked best. Rather, that would be our little game.

Let's get real here. The temptations that Jesus faced are similar to those we continue to face as the followers of Christ these centuries later. The church as God's marketing strategy here on earth is in a real mess. I can say all the time how I feel like I belong to a wonderfully humble congregation in a marginalized old mainline denomination that isn't all that interested in being glorified or powerful, and yet I'm still stuck with the same title as the Westboro Baptist folks who also call themselves Christian and who plan to spew hate on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University tomorrow. I can tell you that I genuinely believe that Pope Francis is humble and kind, but the abuse that has been unveiled in the Catholic church scandals around sexual abuse and it's cover up make me sick to my stomach, and they aren't the only denomination with scandal afoot. I can tell you how much I love Jesus, and I can tell you how

frequently I have been hurt by those who claim to follow him. In times when the church has been at its worst, and it's almost embarrassing to call oneself a Christian, the harsh critiques have to come from within. We have to be the bold voices who say that this is not who we are. This is not the Jesus that we follow. We have to name the temptations, and how the church has succumbed to those temptations, so we can choose to do better in the future.

Jesus faced off with the devil. His vision-quest into the wilderness brought him back with these archetypal temptation narratives. Having everything we want, holding power, feeling like the favorite one – we all want those things to some extent. And yet, it's best to know that no matter how much we get what we desire or feel as though we have full control, there will always be more out of our reach. Getting comfortable with that feeling is a good thing. It's OK to be the church that isn't rich, or powerful, or even popular. What I hope we will want to be is the church that is faithful, the church that seeks Jesus first, that humbles itself, that knows that no matter what becomes of it, it can testify to the love of God in the midst of whatever sinful world we find ourselves in. Because, again, we have no other choice. The world is a mixed-bag, and rather than us church folk striving to be something big, the important thing is for is to make God's love known repeatedly, and with whatever voice we can lend. Faithfully. Obediently. With the message that we preach. With the conduct that we demonstrate to the outside world. We belong to Jesus – not the whims of the world. It's difficult to keep that message up – especially when there are corruptions both in the church and in the world that speak louder, bolder, or cruder than we care to be ourselves. But perhaps it has always been the voice off to the side that reminds us that the temptations are real, and that the devil can be told flat out “no.” We are called to testify in the midst of a sinful world, in the presence of a sinful church – to the love of Christ that reminds us that in God we all belong and that any other narrative is a flat out lie. Amen.