

Draw Near and Experience Victory

Luke 4:1-13

INTRODUCTION

It is known as a “cliffhanger,” that moment in a story that is so filled with suspense and mystery you want to keep watching, or listening, or reading so you can discover what happens next. A good story always has a cliffhanger. For example:

- On November 21, 1980 350 million people tuned in to discover “Who shot JR?”
- The classic literary cliffhangers are found in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Arabic folk stories. The collection’s central story revolves around a young bride named Scheherazade, who tells her new husband (who is also the king) story after story as a way to save herself from execution. Each story Scheherazade tells has a different cliffhanger ending, prompting her husband to keep her alive so he can find out what happens next.
- My personal favorite cliffhangers came at the end of each episode of Batman – the real Batman – the one starring Adam West. Each week the show would end with the caped crusader and his Boy Wonder in some dire circumstance, from which rescue seemed unlikely. They would be strapped to conveyer belt inching slowly toward an oversized saw blade as the announcer asked a couple of cliffhanger questions, like:
 - Will Robin be cut to ribbons?
 - Before concluding with: Tune in next week. Same Bat time. Same Bat channel.

Our Gospel today concludes with its own cliffhanger. After 40 days of failed attempts to derail the ministry of Jesus, Satan apparently gives up and leaves Jesus alone in the wilderness. But wait! There is a cliffhanger added by the Gospel writer:

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:13)

An opportune time. There’s the cliffhanger! The tempting wasn’t over. It was just over ... for now. Stay tuned! The devil was planning to return and continue his quest to derail God’s plan of salvation. In his explanation of the passage, one old-time commentator put it like this:

Having emptied his quiver, the devil quitted the field, resolved to attack him again. (Matthew Henry)

During this season of Lent we are responding to the invitation of God to DRAW NEAR to the cross of Christ. Our theme verse is James 4:8:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

Throughout these forty days – from now until Easter Sunday on April 17 -- we will journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward His death, burial and resurrection, and as we do,

we will hear the invitation to DRAW NEAR clearly and we will strive to respond to it positively.

- To help remind us of this invitation, we have added another cross to our chancel throughout this season. It will be a reminder of God's invitation. This cross was built by Dean Settles. Robert Thompson created the stand for it.
 - The cross will play an important part in our worship service on Good Friday.
- During the midweek services – each Thursday and again on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday – we will meet one of the characters of the Biblical narrative who can be found at the foot of the cross. As we meet them, we will discover an aspect of faith from them.
 - This coming Thursday at 7 p.m. we will talk about two secret disciples: Joseph of Arimathea and his colleague Nicodemus.
- On Sunday mornings, we will use the readings from the Revised Lectionary (as we do each week) and learn about what we will EXPERIENCE as we draw near.
 - Today we learn that as we DRAW NEAR to the cross we EXPERIENCE VICTORY over temptation, something we desperately need as we seek to live a life that pleases God.

So our journey toward Jerusalem begins with a cliffhanger. Now you might ask:

Why do we start at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when Lent is all about the end of it?

Well, because of that cliffhanger, that phrase “an opportune time.” We see here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry the efforts of the devil and we realize that it's not over when our Gospel reading ends. The devil continued to be a nuisance all throughout all three years Jesus ministered here on earth. No matter the situation, the devil was never far away. As we read the Gospel story, we see that ...

- From time to time, the devil would rile up the people about the silliest of things. Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, for example, thought Jesus was getting a bit uppity with all of his miracles and such. After all, he was one of them. Once they got so riled up, his former neighbors and childhood playmates even tried to kill him.
- The devil also used the religious leaders of the day to create irritations for Jesus. They peppered him with questions like “Who gives you the authority to heal someone on the Sabbath?”
- Jesus even had to rebuke Peter with the words “Get behind me Satan!”
- But by and large these issues were nothing significant – those pesky flies that buzz around your head on a summer day. Jesus was able to respond to them in ways that didn't impact his mission.

The “big one” came on the day we now call Maundy Thursday. That was the opportune time our text was pointing toward. That next day was Good Friday – crucifixion day – so all day Thursday the shadow of the cross was looming large in the

mind of Jesus. And it intensified as Jesus and his disciples left the dinner table and walked into the Garden of Gethsemane.

- By this time, Judas had already left that group to betray him. Jesus knew what Judas was doing. In fact, Jesus told him:

What you are about to do, do quickly. (John 13:27)

- What happened next is the image portrayed in the stained glass behind me. There in the Garden that Thursday evening Jesus was the most vulnerable he had ever been – even more so than he was during the temptations in the wilderness.
 - The anxiety and stress of that moment resulted in Jesus sweating drops of blood.
 - Crucifixion was no ordinary death. The pain would be excruciating.
 - Jesus described what he was feeling like this:

This sorrow is crushing the life out of me. (Matthew 26:38)

- NOW was clearly the opportune time and the devil went to work.
- We hear it in the prayer Jesus prayed:

If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me.
(Matthew 26:39)

Moments later the guards came and arrested him. The devil must have been rejoicing in that moment. He thought he had won! But instead of derailing the plan of God, Jesus lived out the second half of that prayer.

Not my will, but thine be done. (Matthew 26:39)

And because he did, the power of the devil was defeated. The cross stands as a symbol of victory. By his death, Jesus conquered once and for all time sin, death and the devil. So as we DRAW NEAR ... we find the strength necessary to withstand the temptations of the devil and to EXPERIENCE VICTORY in our walks of faith.

So what did Jesus do? What lessons can we learn as we DRAW NEAR? Let me quickly share three. What did Jesus do?

#1: JESUS PRAYED

The Son of God – the God who became flesh and dwelt among us – prayed. If anyone who has ever lived could have survived without praying it was Jesus. But even he prayed.

- Sometimes when the temptations are the strongest and the pressures are the most intense, prayer slips from our minds.
- But Jesus prayed. His first thought seems to have been “I need to talk my Father about this.”

And when he prayed, he prayed honestly. "Please, Father, I don't want to do this. Is there any other way?"

And in that opportune moment he also recruited others to pray with him. They failed to be of much assistance, but he invited them anyway.

In just a couple of moments, as a congregation we will pray the Lord's Prayer. In it is a line that we often pray without giving it much thought.

Lead us not into temptation...

Today, think about it as you pray it.

#2: JESUS RELIED ON SCRIPTURE

Each time the devil came at Jesus with a temptation, Jesus responded with a verse of Scripture. That was not limited to the story in Luke 4:

- When the religious leaders accused him of breaking the law because he and his disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, Jesus responded "Haven't you read in Scripture what King David did?"
- At least three of the seven final words of Jesus on the cross were quotations from Old Testament Scripture.

Psalms 119:11 urges us to do that same:

I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)

Do you want victory over temptation? Do what Jesus did. Memorize the Scriptures.

#3: JESUS TRUSTED GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

In the end, Jesus was able to withstand the devil's temptations because he knew that God could be trusted with the outcome. Jesus knew that God's way is always the best way.

You can say "Thy will be done" if you are confident His way is best.

That is something you have to learn over time as you walk in faith. God teaches it to you in the little things so that you know it to be true when the big ones come.

Learn to apply this advice from Proverbs 3:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

APPLICATION

Just for curiosity's sake, I googled "ways to resist temptation." I knew the secular world would have different suggestions, but I thought it might be interesting to compare what Jesus did to the advice of today's experts. So here is a list of five suggestions I found in Psychology Today, compiled a PhD who I will leave nameless. What should you do when you tempted to do something wrong?

1. Distract yourself with someone else you enjoy
2. Delay it for 15 minutes, because it will probably go away
3. Make a list of consequences
4. Give the temptation a distasteful name
5. Take a nap

I realize this list was written about 2000 years after Jesus died, so he never read it. But I doubt he would have done anything on that list anyway. No he prayed, relied on Scripture and trusted that God would be faithful.

- And despite the devil's best shot, Jesus experienced victory over temptation.

As you DRAW NEAR to the cross, you will too.

Amen.