

Sunday, March 9, 2003

A Sermon Preached by  
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



# The Face of Evil

Luke 4:1-13; Romans 7:15-21

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, pour through me the gift of preaching today that these words may truly be your Living Word to us. May they be faithful to you, faithful to the text and may they call all of us to faithfulness. We know and claim that they will be, O God, for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

The former Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes hurriedly boarded a train. When Judge Holmes got on the train he looked in his pocket to find his train ticket. He looked in his coat pocket and in his pants pocket. He just couldn't find the train ticket. The conductor came by and was very patient and understanding. He said, "Judge Holmes, don't worry about the ticket, just send it in when you find it. We trust you for the money. Don't worry about it." Judge Holmes was not amused. He was still irritated and mad. He said, "Good sir, the problem is not where is my ticket. The problem is where am I going?"

Knowing where you're going is an important part of life. It's so important that corporations in our world today have created mission statements and vision statements that express their core values. It is hard to walk into any corporate headquarters and not find written somewhere the mission statement or the vision statement stating the values that organization holds dear. Corporate America has been learning in recent years that even though a corporation may be very successful, if they don't know where they're really going or where they should be going, they can lose their way.

Do you know that during 1930s, 40s and 50s, the most important and successful money-making industry in America was the American railroad. In 1950 the Pennsylvania Railroad was voted the number one best-managed corporation in the United States of America. It was number one. But Theodore Levitt of Harvard University said they were foolishly and imperturbably self-confident. They didn't know where they were going. They made the mistake of thinking they were in the

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railroad business. Levitt said, "If only they had realized they weren't in the railroad business but in the transportation business, then they could have gotten into jumbo jets, into highways, into shipping and trucking and into satellite communication. They didn't know where they were going."

Do you know where you're going? The BMW Corporation knew where it was going. They wanted to make a luxury automobile that would be good and a little more affordable than a Mercedes Benz which was the number one luxury car at the time. So BMW decided to come up with a mission statement that would inspire their employees to make them the number one luxury car in the world. They came up with a two-word mission statement, "Beat Benz." And it inspired their workers to make a wonderful automobile.

Do you have a mission statement – a personal one? Do you know, do I know, does our church know where we're going? Unless I miss my guess there's somebody here this morning who is in a stage of transition in life. Your job has ended, you're facing retirement, you're facing an illness, you are on the brink of graduating or maybe you've got another year of study. And you're not sure what you're going to do in that next stage of life. Maybe you've had a loss. Maybe you've had a dramatic change in your economic status and you're really not sure what the future is going to hold. In those moments of life, to be honest, when there's change and when there's transition, it's very hard to know where you're going. Unless I miss my guess, there's somebody here today whose central question of life is, where am I going?

If you've ever asked that question or if you're asking it this morning, then you can relate to this little vignette

that's tucked away in Luke 4. It is a magnificent story that was read so beautifully by Raph Hubbard from our Confirmation Class. It's a wonderful story of the temptation of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the temptation. What is happening in the temptation narrative is that Jesus of Nazareth is asking the question, in a sense, where am I going? Jesus was in a time of transition in his life. Jesus had made a career change. Fred Craddock, the great biblical commentator said, "We don't really think about it, but Jesus for most of his life was a carpenter. It was the trade he knew. Then He makes a pretty dramatic career change. He is called by God to be the Messiah."

After his baptism, the heavens opened and God said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased." Mark says, the Spirit of God drove Jesus out into the wilderness, into a desolate area. Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. We've heard that number forty before, haven't we? Didn't we hear that in the Old Testament? Wasn't Moses on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights when he received the Ten Commandments? Didn't Elijah go for 40 days and 40 nights when Jezebel was chasing after him? And didn't the children of Israel wander in the wilderness for 40 years? The Hebrew number 40 stands for a very long time.

Jesus was in this wilderness, this desolate place, for a very long time. What he was trying to do during this time was get his mind around this concept of Messiah. The Jews had an idea of what the Messiah was going to be. The Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, and the Romans had an idea. Everybody had expectations of the Messiah. What's important was that Jesus had to get his mind around it. He had to get his head around it, as we say today. So he went off for a very long time. Many of us have done that when we've taken a new job or faced retirement. We take some time to get our mind around it. That's what Jesus was doing. When Jesus was in the wilderness, the Gospel writer Luke says, the devil came to him. I know what some of you are thinking. Why is he bringing up the devil at a time like this?

Calvin Butts, when he preached here a couple of weeks ago at the 9:00 AM service, said "People often ask me why do I mention the devil so much in my preaching. It's because I know the devil so well." Anybody here know the devil? It's very interesting. C.S. Lewis has written two books on this topic, *That Hideous Strength* and *Screwtape Letters*. In both of them he says, the devil comes to us disguised. The devil comes to us disguised as something good. The devil never comes to us and says, what I'm about to suggest to you is going to ruin your life. Oh, no the devil is too smart for that. The devil never says you're going to get into addiction, you're going to commit suicide, you're going to just walk out of your job one day. The devil is too smart. The

devil starts with wedges. The wedges are those little tiny things that the devil can sneak into your life. They sneak up on you and you don't even know they're there. The devil gets a wedge in there with something like discouragement.

Ever been discouraged? Defeatism, despair, depression, resentment, bitterness, anxiety, worry and fear, these are all little wedges. The devil puts them in your life and once the devil gets you focused on how resentful and bitter you are or how angry, how worried, anxious or afraid you are, then the devil can drive in the really big things. The devil did not come to Jesus with a temptation that Jesus would have said, oh don't bother me, don't waste my time with that. The devil tempted Jesus with things that were good. Jesus knew it and Jesus faced it. He faced within himself – listen carefully now – that He would have had within himself the capacity for evil.

One of the questions in today's Lenten Devotional Guide is "Was Jesus not able to sin or was he able not to sin?" It's an important question. I believe that Jesus was able not to sin. For if he was able not to sin he would have been a robot. But if he was not able to sin it means that he faced the capacity of evil within himself. He was able to look at it in the eye and He was able to conquer it and defeat it. So when you face temptation and when I face it, Jesus Christ can be there for us. The devil tempted Jesus with some pretty important things. One was turning the stones, those little limestones into bread. Jesus was very hungry himself. He most certainly must have been focusing on food, but not just for himself. Jesus lived in the country of Palestine with very poor, hungry people.

## **The Problems of Society Are Not Hidden From Us**

Every night when I leave Fifth Avenue church I see homeless people. I appreciate the fact that we see some of the problems of our society right here on the street. They are not hidden from us. We see the problems and we have to confront them. Jesus saw the hungry, broken people and he had compassion for them. So that first temptation of turning those stones into loaves of bread was not some little temptation. I believe Jesus could have done it. But it would have been gratification. Jesus knew that to give gratification to people or to meet all their immediate needs, he would have gotten off the track of being the Messiah that God wanted him to be. As soon as you meet all the needs of the people, then people say, well what have you done for me lately? Instant gratification – Jesus rejected it. It wasn't that he wasn't compassionate. He knew he was not on the face of the earth to meet people's physical needs.

Next the devil took Jesus up to a high place. Jesus saw all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said, "Jesus, all this could be yours. All you have to do is just bow down and worship me." Anybody ever heard that voice? This extra bit of money could be yours or this promotion could be yours, if you just. The devil comes to us and tries to get us to think about all the things that could be ours. I believe that Jesus could have been another Alexander the Great. I think he could have been the greatest military ruler the world had ever seen. Everybody was set up for it. But Jesus knew that if he gave the people what they wanted he would become the political messiah. He wouldn't have been the messiah God wanted him to be. I think when Jesus saw the world, he not only saw the hungry people whom he could have gratified, that's one temptation, but another temptation would have been liberation.

I think Jesus could have liberated all the oppressed people of the world and that would have been wonderful. I think he was tempted to do it. But he didn't do it. Why? Because to do that he would have been a political military messiah. And once you liberate one group then they want you to liberate another group. He was tempted to do it just as he was tempted with gratification. It was a very real temptation. It could have been good to liberate all the oppressed peoples of the world. I think his heart broke just as Jesus' heart breaks today for oppressed people all over the world. I think he knew that if he succumbed to gratification and liberation, he would not be the messiah God wanted him to be.

The third temptation after gratification and liberation was sensation. Jesus went to the pinnacle of the Temple. And Satan quoting the Bible said, "Jesus, the Kidron Valley is 450 feet below. All you have to do is jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and the angels will come and rescue you and you will live. It will be a dramatic sign!" Ah but remember evil twists good, evil is l-i-v-e spelled backwards. Evil takes what is good and twists it. Do you know people who twist the Bible all around? Evil is very familiar with scripture. So evil tempts Jesus. The Bible says, Psalm 91, he'll give his angels charge of you. It will be a sign and Jesus knew there was something about giving people a sign. He was tempted with it all through his ministry. The problem is the more you produce a sign and a wonder, then the more people want.

There's a family I'm meeting with now and their little boy who is just a few months old has a brain tumor. I've called on this boy in the hospital. My heart breaks for this little boy and his parents. I wonder, Jesus' heart must break for him, if mine does. Jan and Oscar and Randy and I meet with many of you. Our hearts break for the things that you struggle with. Our hearts break as pastors. I think Jesus' heart broke too. He would

have loved to have healed more people. He would have loved to have been able to reach out more to the sick and the broken. He would have loved to have done that. We would love to do it. He would have loved it but he knew that if he did that it would just be one more sensation and they would want more and more so he rejected all this. He rejected gratification. He rejected liberation. He rejected sensation and you know why? Because he didn't come to bring liberation. He didn't come to bring gratification. He didn't come to bring sensation. Jesus came into the world to bring salvation. If I was at Abyssinian Baptist they would have said AMEN – you know it's not easy to preach at Fifth Avenue. I know. Your attentiveness is your Amen. I know that!

### **Jesus Christ Came to Be Our Saviour**

The truth is when Jesus Christ came into the world he could have done all those other things but he came to be the Savior. He brought salvation because he knew that salvation is what we needed. I say what I'm about to say as lovingly as I can. One of the sinister temptations of the devil is that the devil would love us to be able to personify evil in someone else. If we say she is evil or he is evil or that group of people is evil, we put all the evil over there and we think as soon as I eliminate them, then the evil is gone. I say this lovingly but even if we eliminate Saddam Hussein, that's not the end of evil. Even if we find Osama bin Laden and eliminate him, that is not the end of terrorism. Even if we find all the Al Qaeda networks and end all of them, that's not the end of terrorism or evil. It's not the end. Jesus was saying you can personify evil and think we'll get rid of all the evil over there, well, that's not the end of evil. Evil is much more complicated, much bigger than that. That is why Jesus came for salvation – to deal with the evil not out there but the evil within us.

It's not easy for the United States of America these days. The world doesn't always admire and appreciate us. Some in the world see us as the bully. Many see us as the evil empire. Others see our President, our Congress, our government as evil. As long as we keep looking for the enemy out there somewhere, we miss the point – we've bought right into the devil's game. The devil wants to say OK, there is evil, so eliminate it. There is evil over there, eliminate that. There is more evil, eliminate it there. You can spend your whole life doing that and you haven't addressed evil. That's why Jesus didn't come to eliminate all evil. Alexander Solzenitzen said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful, to take all the evil people and put them over there, then we wouldn't have to deal with them. And all of us good people would stay right here." The problem, Solzenitzen said is that the line separating good and evil cuts right through the human heart.

We've got to recognize the evil in us. I've got to look at the evil in me and you've got to look at the evil in you. The United States has got to look at the evil inside. Iraq, North Korea, everybody, they've all got to look at the evil in themselves. For no nation is all good and no nation is all bad. The line of good and evil cuts right through governments and right through human hearts. What Jesus is saying in Luke chapter 4, is we have to address the evil within. Evil isn't out there somewhere, the evil is in here. This is why Jesus came for salvation – to save human beings. Read Romans 7 again. It's on the cover of today's Bulletin. "I do not do the good I want but I do the very thing I didn't want to do." Have you ever done that? Have you ever had a good intention? Have you ever said you're going to do something and you didn't do it, instead you did the very thing you said you would never do? Have you ever had that experience? That's the human experience. We all do it. That's why Jesus came, to give us salvation. Because he knows we need it.

Last Saturday night I was so moved by talking to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I was moved when he painted a picture at the Crossroads Capital Campaign banquet of what the world could be. He painted a picture of what salvation looks like in human terms. Salvation is a word really meaning health. Our word *salve* comes from it. He painted a picture of what the world could be if human beings didn't destroy the earth

but instead cared for the water and the forests and the trees. What would our world be like if Hussein and Bush, and Arafat and Sharon would get along with one another? What might the world be if people lived in harmony? Tutu said, "If we as a church don't hold up the vision of what the world was meant to be, who is going to hold up that vision?"

So I just close with a thought. Some years ago a fourth grade class went to see a silversmith. They were impressed with the way the silversmith was making sterling silver. It was beautiful. They saw many of the things that were made. The silversmith was a genius. The silversmith explained that what was about to go into the oven was not yet perfected. It had impurities. It had to be purified. Before it was put into the oven the mixture was purified and then put in the oven where more of the impurities were going to be burned off – the last of the impurities. One child said, "Mr. Silversmith, how do you know when the silver is finished? How do you know when it's sterling?" The silversmith said, "It's very easy. When I look through the window and see the reflection of my own face in the silver then I know the silver is finished.?"

You and I are on the face of the earth so that when people see us, they will see the face of Jesus. The question of the day is, what does God see when God looks into your face and mine?

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on cassette tape.

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