



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**Temptation As Clarification**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

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*Note: The phrase, "Excavating the Beloved," used frequently in this sermon, comes from a quotation explaining how the writer gauges the success of his translating poetry: "Does it put "golden tools" into our hands that can help excavate the Beloved whom we and society have buried so deep inside?" (Ladinsky, Daniel, translations by, The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master)*

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, that means always that the story for our focused attention and learning is the story of the temptation of Jesus after his 40 days of fasting in the desert. For those of you, like me, who may have been raised to associate the word, "temptation," with something like Tiger Woods's story and confession this past Friday, the temptation that you and I are to consider this morning is neither about temptation that comes to economically entitled people alone nor is the temptation we are considering this morning about sexual temptation. Jesus was a poor peasant who couldn't have gotten an endorsement contract if he had tried. And none of the three temptations involved Jesus' sex life.

The temptation we are to be aware of not only in Jesus' life but in our lives as well is much more profound, subtle, pernicious, pervasive, and destructive to ourselves and to the world. It can indeed result in sexual immorality, irresponsibility, and unspeakable relational damage to be sure. But on a much more profound level than sexual enticement, the kind of temptation I think this story asks us to come to terms with this morning is the most universal and deepest temptation of them all – the temptation to betray our true identity as God sees us. Any analysis of ourselves including any analysis of Tiger Woods must go as deep as this bible story goes – to the depths of our true identity. If you and I do not go to those depths we have short-changed the concept and the power of temptation.

Jesus' struggle in the desert took place immediately after his baptism. As soon as Jesus received that amazing gift of the heavens above opening right there at the River Jordan where he was baptized, and a voice told Jesus that he was God's beloved in whom God was well pleased, what did God's Spirit do then but drive Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Deceiver. What was God up to? I want to argue that God wanted to clarify some things for Jesus and for us.

I think at its deepest level this story is telling us that that our heart, the "soul's center" as St. Teresa of Avila calls it, is the "inner core of our being or the seat of consciousness wherein happens everything that defines one's personality" (Pieris, SJ, Aloysius, "The Heart of Jesus Spirituality and the Prophetic Mission to the Poor: A Scriptural Meditation", *East Asian Pastoral Review*, Vol. 41 (2004) Number 1, p. 33). That

heart, that core of our being is, I think, best understood as *Beloved*. That heart, that Belovedness at our soul's center, is where "we are truly ourselves." It is where we discover and decode the secret name by which God calls each of us into existence. It is where I find the creative word by which I am personally addressed by God. It is there that I recognize, by name, who God desires me to be, the name which contains my specific mission as willed by God." (Ibid) That word is in our heart.

It is to that center of our being, where we are Beloved, that the deceiving energies in life come – to tempt us to deny and betray our true identity as Beloved.

Before moving on, I want to say a word about the devil. When the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church was being finalized, there was a member of one of the drafting committees who was a great anthropologist who was also a devout Episcopalian. Her name was Professor Margaret Mead. She sat in on the committee (she actually was a member of the committee) that formulated one part of the Prayer Book called the baptismal covenant. There was a debate at one of the meetings one day about whether or not to put into the Prayer Book the word, "Satan." Now, Satan is the word that refers to what I often identify as "Deceiving energies" or "the Deceiver." Well, in this heated meeting that day one of the bishops on the committee expressed some ambivalence about the wisdom of personifying evil by using the word Satan. Dr. Mead was only 5' 2", short in stature but a force of nature. She sat up straight (she always carried a cane she had gotten on one of her anthropological jounies) and she banged her cane on the floor and said, "Your grace, the House of Bishops may not believe in the devil but we anthropologists do." And the word Satan is in the Prayer Book in the pew rack in front of you.

William Sloan Coffin said that the Bible personifies evil as the Devil or Satan "because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power. Its seductions are personally persuasive. And while evil certainly arises within us, still it is experienced as something greater than us – hence its separate existence in these stories." (William Sloan Coffin, "Eyeball to Eyeball with the Devil," sermon preached at Riverside Church, New York City, February 20, 1983)

Let me warn you that it is always a mistake to think that evil always is outside us. We got into that trouble during the last presidential administration when President Bush often talked about "evil-doers." We were consistently positing evil outside of us instead of understanding that we need to confess that evil is within us. Actually, that is one of the great deceptions of the Deceiving Energies: always to think that evil is outside us.

However, an even greater deception is when the Deceiver, the devil wants nothing more than for us to forget that we are Beloved at our core and that everyone else in life is Beloved at their core. Most of us walk through life with our own Beloved, our Belovedness buried by ourselves, buried by the temptations we have given into, and buried by how our culture of fear has hidden this Belovedness from ourselves and from one another. So Lent, which is going into the wilderness with Jesus is about excavating the Beloved from all that would use our gifts and the preciousness of ourselves and of one another for the agendas that oppose God's agendas.

The devil has certain agenda items and they are always presented in a form that would make us less than confident that we are Beloved. The formula for every temptation, for all three temptations in the story we just heard starts “If you are the Son of God, if you are the Beloved” the devil says to introduce each temptation to Jesus. The devil’s thinking is always, “ It is not enough to believe, you have to prove yourself.” It’s not enough just to be grateful that you and I are beloved by God. We get into our minds that we have to prove something.

That brings to mind Leonard Cohen’s wonderful phrase in his great song “Halleluiaah,” talking about King David “Your faith was strong but you needed proof.” So let’s quickly go through these three temptations.

The first agenda item of the devil or temptation for Jesus (and for us) is the temptation to live on the level of “bread alone.” To be sure, bread is extremely important, we all need our daily bread – but that is the only bread for which Jesus teaches us to pray – “give us this day our daily bread.” He doesn’t teach us to pray about securing our bread for ourselves years into the future. One can be so absorbed in living to provide bread for years into the distant future that one can live totally unaware of God’s presence within us and within others. The greatest temptation not to be aware that something sacred is at stake in this very moment is to be a person who lives on the level of “bread alone.” There is something more to life than bread alone. So this temptation for Jesus and for us is to clarify for us that life given over to a “bread alone” existence is a life in which we constantly eat the bread of anxiety.

The second agenda item of the Deceiver shown in the second temptation of Jesus is to be a person who has “power over” others instead of what is God’s agenda, which is to use our power to empower everyone. For us to live a life of dominating power, a controlling power, that is a sure-fire way to ignore the Beloved in myself and in everyone else. To have dominance is one of the deepest temptations there can be – interpersonal dominance of a spouse over the other spouse, or parents over children, or one religion over another or over people who are not religious, or the dominance of one nation over another.

One of the most despicable ways to bury the Beloved in myself or bury the awareness of the Beloved in another person (and by the way you cannot bury the Beloved in another person without at the same time burying the Beloved in yourself – we are that interconnected) but one of the most despicable way to bury the Beloved or bury the awareness of the Beloved in another person is through certain laws and policies of a state or of a government.

Because of this past week’s revelations, I cannot this Sunday be silent about torture.

Last week’s released report from the Office of Professional Responsibility in the Department of Justice showed that the White House under President Bush encouraged lawyers in the Justice Department to write memos misinterpreting the law in order to sanction the use of torture.

The report that came out last week corroborates former Vice President Cheney's recent statement that the lawyers in the Justice Department had just, and I’m quoting him, 'done what we asked them to do.'

Unless we who join God in God's project of excavating the Beloved from ourselves and everyone else, unless we all join a resistance movement to say we condemn what has become the new normal in the United States of torturing other people who bear the image of God, the Belovedness of other people will remain buried. The new facts revealed in the report connects to Cheney's recent claim that he was a 'big supporter of waterboarding.' It highlights the need for us to have in this country a Commission of Inquiry on U.S.-sponsored torture.

A Commission of Inquiry is necessary to describe fully the scope and depth of the use of torture by the U.S., to resolve questions about the techniques that were used, and to recommend safeguards that will ensure that torture by the U.S. never happens again.

The third temptation. The third agenda item taking us away from using our Beloved heart for God's agenda is to want our religion to be miracle-based. Richard Rohr writes, "Jesus refused to sell out to a gospel of signs and wonders. He refused to entertain people in order to make them believe. He refused to jump off that parapit." Rohr continues, "If you believe only because you have seen a sign or a miracle, you do not really yet believe. The quick sense of awe and wonder you feel is not faith. It will soon fall by the wayside because it has taken no risks and plowed no new ground and it doesn't have any hope. Ironically, the only people for whom miracles are truly miracles are those who had faith before the miracle happened. They see in it a great act a confirmation of the truth they already believed and then they praised God for it." (Rohr, Richard, *The Good News According to Luke*, p. 101)

"Two people can see a miracle. The one with faith will praise God, the one without will find some way to forget it or explain it and that is simply the history of Christianity. Miracles and signs don't produce people of deep faith, because invariably what such people want is another sign next Friday night to carry them through another week. That's the depth of their religion. God is their private magician." (Rohr, Richard, *The Good News According to Luke*, p. 101)

When I fall prey to any one or more of these temptations, the signs in my body and myself and my relationships are frenzy, anxiety, a lack of centeredness, and a lack of connection to my heart where I am deeply beloved.

So in these 40 days of Lent may I ask you these questions:

Will you commit yourself to take some time to breathe in order to make time for some personal inventory about these matters?

Will you make time to experience the belovedness in others, particularly those who are vulnerable and marginalized?

Before I go on with the rest of my list let me simply give you an example: I've just been amazed at some email correspondence I've been copied on by some members of this parish who have been going to the cold weather shelter to volunteer as part of the All Saints team here in Pasadena; and what has been happening to them in discovering the beloved in people who are homeless. We've had this ministry called Transformational Journeys here at All Saints for the past several years and the people have gone from South Africa to Malawi to India to the streets

of East Los Angeles to the public schools here in this town. I always have a debriefing meal with every Transformational Journey team and I am amazed at the transformative power of people connecting with the beloved in people who are marginalized and vulnerable.

Are you making time this Lent to experience the belovedness in others, particularly those who are vulnerable and marginalized?

Are you resisting politically those things like torture, or like the absence of health care, or the presence of economic injustice in the world, or the predominance of war as a tool to fight terror, or the lack of public funds for public education in Pasadena or where you live?

Are you resisting those things that bury the beloved in other people?

You know every time you and I get a gift from God that gift gets tested. No gifts ever come into life that aren't tested. A new friendship, a marriage, a church, whatever the gift is – a new job. Like steel we human beings are not durable until we've been tempered and tested. Every grace that comes our way simply won't work as it was intended to work unless it is tested to see if we will work that gift for God's agenda and God's dream for the world instead of for the devil's agenda.

What gift that you have this morning is being tested now and throughout Lent to see if you are using it to promote God's dream, or on the other hand to advance the culture of fear, violence, injustice and discrimination, and selfishness in this Lent?

Let us pray that every gift that is tested will be not a moment to bury further our Belovedness but will be a moment to clarify how beloved we and everyone else is.

Amen.