“Thurman’s ‘Structure of Dependability’”

A sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman for the First Sunday in Lent

March 6th, 2022

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

All I could hear at my first read-through of our Gospel passage was my mother’s voice in what was probably her most common request to my younger brother-- “just ignore her.” The “her” was me, who, as an older sibling, was incredibly fond of challenging any claim by my brother that he was good at something. “Well,” I can hear my childhood self say, “if you’re so good at math, why don’t you come over here and do *my* math homework!?” Or, “Well, if you’re such a fast runner, let’s have a race.” “Just ignore her,” my mother would counsel my brother. “Don’t engage.”

The devil’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness can sound like the same dynamic. The devil playing the older sibling, and Jesus actually heeding the wisdom to “not engage”…wisdom my brother, like most younger siblings, never heeded, by the way, much to my enjoyment.

But, although it seems like a similar dynamic, the temptation of Jesus in the desert is no sibling squabble. There is too much at stake, or perhaps I should say too many at stake (people, that is), and the challenge is not fundamentally about whether Jesus is, actually, the Son of God. It all hinges on the translation of the word “if”. What the New Revised Standard Version (the translation we use) translates as “if,” many scholars argue should actually be translated as “Since.” So, it’s quite possibly not “*If* you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread,” but instead, “*Since* you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread.”

With this change, the devil’s temptations do not challenge Jesus to prove his identity as the Son of God. The devil seems to accept that. The question the devil is raising, then, is not “are you the Son of God?” but instead, quoting one commentator, “how should the Son of God act?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The elephant in the room, of course, is the Roman Empire and its leaders…So, the real question is will the Son of God act like *them*? Will he manipulate those things under his subjection for *his own* needs?

Thankfully, the answer Jesus gives the devil, and each of us, is “no.” In stark contrast to the leaders of the Roman Empire, *Jesus* will stand with those who are hungry, those who are poor, as the theologian and architect of the civil rights movement Howard Thurman put it, those whose “backs are against the wall.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In the desert of temptation, Jesus aligns himself with the experience of those who live in the most desperate of circumstances, but *cannot* manufacture bread to fill their stomachs… those who jump off the building and actually hit the ground, hard.

How should God’s son act? He should act as one who is human, and to be human is to be bound by what Thurman calls “the structure of dependability”[[3]](#footnote-3) on which the world is built. A structure of cause and effect which weaves us all together into an interdependent whole. Jesus will, all the way to his death, choose to stand in that structure, effecting miracles which overcome it not for himself, but *only* for the purposes of liberating those who are bent under the burden of carrying more of the structure than is theirs to carry.

In decisively refusing to use his power to alter the rules for himself, he boldly affirms not only the dignity and fundamental belovedness of those who are hungry, poor, and oppressed, but he also affirms the reality of the structure of interdependence, itself.

And that is, to me, the invitation to Lent. Jesus’ affirmation of both those on the margins and the reality of our interdependence with *every other*…..human and non-human, should challenge those of you, like me, whose resources tempt us to think that the structure of interdependence does not apply to us—that we are an exception to the rule. They should challenge those, like me, whose resources can fairly nearly make bread out of stones, and so tempt us to look away from the ties we have to our hungry siblings, and the ways in which we are part of the cause and effect web that has contributed to their hunger.

Why do we start Lent with Jesus’ temptation in the desert? Because temptation of this sort, especially, required Jesus and requires us now to see the structure of dependability in which we *are*, indeed, entwined, and to decide—consciously and with intention—whether we are going to act as if we are an exception, or rather, align ourselves with those whose backs are against the wall and put our resources towards their quest for liberation.

If we do the first, let us be clear that the reality of our interdependence will not change. The early result will be that those with less power and fewer resources will bear much more of the weight of the web. But, eventually, that imbalance will draw us all over the edge. We’re experiencing that now with climate change. For too long we have failed to acknowledge the web of dependability, too long deluded ourselves into thinking we can escape the natural consequences of our actions. For too long our Earth has been bearing the full weight of the web, and now the imbalance is putting us at the top of increasingly taller buildings, where we must jump off, into the reality that we *will*, in fact, break something when we land. We *will* feel the structure of interdependence eventually.

And so, in this painful and jarring reality, we come to Lent. A time that begins by reminding us that Jesus has bound himself to all those bodies which bear the burden of carrying more of the web of interdependence than is theirs to carry: hungry bodies, women’s bodies, black and brown bodies, queer bodies, creaturely bodies with fins and wings and fur and roots, bodies fleeing war. Lent begins by reminding us of how the Son of God should, and *did* act, when he was in his own body, and thus, Lent begins by reminding us of how we, the Body of Christ now, in this time and place, should and *can* act. As Christ’s Body we, too, are bound to those same bodies, and we, too, are empowered by the Holy Spirit to act as Jesus acted—to affirm—celebrate even—our interdependence and use its web as a tool to pull those who have been crushed under its weight back to their feet.

Lent begins….and so *we* pray:

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the vulnerabilities of each of us *and so have knit us together*, remind us of these connecting threads, for the purpose of your love; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

1. *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Book VIII: Luke and John*, Abingdon Press, 2015, p. 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, 1976 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Howard Thurman, *The Temptations of Jesus #2: The Dilemma in the Wilderness*--A sermon given on September 13, 1962. Accessed online on 3/4/22 at <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=343827> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)