

Luke 4:1-13 and Genesis 12:1-9
February 21, 2010

South Plains

to receiving: a new country, descendants more numerous than the stars in heaven, and the joy of becoming a blessing to many nations.

An Opportune Time

Luke's account of the temptation of Jesus ends on an ominous note: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time (4:13)." Isn't that the way temptation comes? When it is most opportune for the devil, and least expected for us? I think the devil missed his best opportunity here at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Coaches and teachers tell us that the right influences at the very beginning of a career are critically important to success. If Jesus had fallen victim to the temptation to turn stones into bread, or to gain glory by worshipping the devil, or to become famous by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple, his disobedience would have spelled disaster. Last week, one of the downhill racers in the Olympics fell 30 yards from the starting gate. She never really got into the course. Years of preparation and hard work were lost in an instant. Getting off on the right foot is essential.

Today we have three stories about starting out. South Plains has been preparing for Kirk Hall for the past 30 years. In the next few weeks, we will approve the financing and sign a contract to begin construction. In our reading from Genesis, Abram is starting on his journey to the Promise Land. He is breaking ties with the old country, leaving his kin and his father's house behind him, in search of new life. He has much to look forward

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is baptized at about age 30 and will soon begin proclaiming the good news of the coming kingdom. But, here at the start of his ministry, he is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil for forty days. It's kind of a boot camp for the Messiah. If he can survive forty days of fasting and being subjected to temptation directly by the devil himself, he can truly be the Messiah. Nora Gallagher suggests that spiritual maturity is about learning to tell the difference between fantasy and reality, between narcotics and food, between stones and bread. If that is what Jesus is about in the wilderness, then he endures the temptations successfully.

We read about this moment in the gospel story every year at the beginning of Lent because we find in Jesus' temptations a model for dealing with our own temptations and trials. I want to suggest that this story is especially relevant when we are starting out on any venture that carries spiritual freight, including the construction of Kirk Hall. To the contemporaries of Abram, his determination to strike out from the fertile crescent of civilization around the Tigris and Euphrates River Valley must have seemed bold, maybe crazy, maybe cunning. Abram would pioneer new territory.

To the contemporaries of Jesus of Nazareth, his decision to become an itinerant rabbi must have also seemed bold. Maybe excessive, maybe prophetic. Jesus would pioneer a new understanding of the Kingdom. He would also inaugurate a new experience of God: God incarnate. God in three persons. God in Christ.

Clearly to some of our contemporaries, an expanded ministry of South Plains Presbyterian Church seems bold: maybe too ambitious; maybe far-sighted. As with Abram, we will be pioneering new territory for us. Unlike Abram, we will not become a great nation, and we are unlikely to become a great church in the eyes of the world. That is not our ambition. We do hope to be a blessing to many other people in our community and even in other nations.

It's significant that the Holy Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness where he goes without food, but also without the support of other people. It's a dose of realism and humility that is probably important for us all when starting out. In another year we will be enjoying fellowship and Sunday School in Kirk Hall. We will be more comfortable in a larger space. However, we will be the same human beings next year that we are today, a little bit older, and maybe a little wiser. We will not be more friendly than we are in the Manse. We will not teach or learn scripture any better. My study will be a little more accessible without the stairs, but when you come to see me I'll be the same, a little older and maybe

a little wiser. Kirk Hall will not change the people who are the reality of South Plains Presbyterian Church.

Whatever positive change happens, and change will come, it will be the work of God. Not only are we saved by grace, we grow and mature by the grace of Christ. We believe we'll grow in numbers. But, in order to grow in the ways that matter to God – in spirit and truth, in our ministry to the world around us, in the likeness of Christ – those aspects of growth depend upon the activity of the Holy Spirit working within the church, gifting us by grace with a mission in Christ's name.

The strange thing about temptation is that the most opportune time for the devil is when we think we're strongest, when we imagine ourselves at the top of our game. Business is doing well, but we see a way to do better by taking more than we should. The family is settled, but we think life could be sweeter by telling a white lie. School is great, but wouldn't it be more fun without keeping those rules. Temptation.

Jesus needs food to eat. He's gone without for 40 days and he has probably not cheated on his diet a single time. He needs a meal. Why not turn stones into bread the easy way? It's nice to have lots of dough for the church. But, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 to the devil: "One does not live by bread alone," or dough either. I'll bet every good Jew who read Luke's gospel in the first century could finish that verse. "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from

the mouth of the Lord.” The church does not thrive off a big bank account. The church thrives by knowing the word of the Lord, studying scripture, and living by that word. That’s our resource against temptation

Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher in Israel. His ministry depended upon a small band of disciples taking his instruction to heart, hearing his words as authoritative words of life. The devil’s second offer was authority in the world, if only Jesus would fall down and worship Satan. I do not expect any of us will be tempted to worship the devil. We will be tempted to worship a new edifice. We will be tempted to put our confidence in the power of a beautiful and spacious building to attract people to Jesus. We will be tempted to think that South Plains’ future is secure once Kirk Hall is finished, and to suppose our job, our service is to keep the floors clean and protect the walls from dirty fingerprints. Jesus goes to Deuteronomy again. Chapter 6, verse 13 says, “The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name only you shall swear.” Avoid the edifice complex at all costs.

The final temptation is the most dramatic. Jesus is a good Jew. His ministry will be pointed toward Jerusalem, the heart of the people of God. “Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple,” says the devil. “You will be saved by the angels promised in the psalms. ‘On their hands they will bear you up.’” The devil is learning that scripture can be useful for his cause. A

dramatic miracle at the temple would be just the thing to prove that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus knows better. He will do miracles and people will be impressed. But, miracles will not turn hearts to God. Deuteronomy 6:16 says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” I think the line between faith and foolishness can be a very fine line. We are moving forward in the faith that God will provide for our needs and will work in the hearts of this community. But, we’re trying hard to avoid being foolish. We do not expect dramatic miracles to bring our plans to fruition. If they came, we’ll praise God.

What we expect is to exercise our faith in the steady work of Christ’s ministry: worship every week, Sunday School, Presbyterian Women, Vacation Bible School, Bible study, our partnerships with Grenada and the Presbytery of the James, Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, the food pantries, the Bridge Ministry and all the opportunities God gives for us to tell the good news of God’s love in Christ.

Temptations always come. Shortcuts are always available, But, we will put our faith in the steadfast grace of God and throw our efforts into living by the word of the Lord.