



ANCHORED IN SCRIPTURE

March 5, 2017, The First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-11

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Theme: Our faith is anchored in Scripture.

We come here for reasons as varied as are we, O God. Startle us again with your word to us in Holy Scripture. May it bring us more than we even know how to expect. May it lead us to deeper inward faith and greater outward faithfulness. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I read a book review in the *Presbyterian Outlook* the other day. I read the review and decided *not* to read the book. The book's about what the author thinks the future Christian church will look like. It suggests that everything – or almost everything – about the church as we know it has to go. Totally new music, scrap traditional liturgy, no more robes for the minister and the choir, in fact no more ministers and choirs. And no more church buildings. According to the book, we only need to hang on to two things: *Jesus* and *the Bible*.

In the story Cosette just read so beautifully, *Jesus* hangs on to the *Bible*. After his baptism, *Jesus* retreated into the Judean desert. There he's tempted by a mysterious figure the story names – in Greek – “*diabolos*.” Great name. It literally means something like “*the-one-who-throws-everything-all-over-the-place*.” *Diabolos* came to be rendered in English as “devil.” *Diabolos* tempts *Jesus* with three things, but each temptation is really a version of the same thing – *power*. In each case, the temptation is for *Jesus* to use power in exactly the way *Jesus* was called *not* to use power.



First, *diabolos* suggests manipulative power (“*You can buy a lot of votes with free bread*”). Next he suggests miraculous power (“*You could really wow ‘em with a leap off the temple into the arms of some angels*”). Lastly, the devil offers political power (“*You want all the kingdoms of the world?*”). I’ve preached about those temptations to power more than once. Today, I want to talk about how Jesus *resisted* those temptations.

He resisted the same way three times. Three times, when old *diabolos* offers Jesus his latest greatest idea about how to be a super successful Messiah, Jesus resists in the same way: *he remembers Scripture*. Jesus remembers three short passages, all from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy:

“*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God...*”

“*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*”

“*Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.*”

Jesus resists by remembering, remembering sacred words he knew like the back of his hand. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, put it this way: “*He had the book of Deuteronomy with him. He had his Bible with him. He had the whole deep resources of faith memories that are old and trusted and reliable. He was not out there alone, but in the company of many ancient, faithful, trusted voices who told him who he was.*”

I don't know exactly what I believe about the devil, but I do know that there is some malign and centrifugal force rumbling about life, a force that's forever "throwing everything all over the place." He, it, whatever this tempter be, would confuse you and me. He, it, whatever, wants to confuse us about what really matters. He, it, whatever, is out to confuse you and me about who we are called to be. He, it, whatever, would entice us down paths that seem alluring at the moment, but are ways that do not lead to full life, the life of high joy and deep integrity

And when we're tempted, tempted with the easy, tempted with the beguiling, tempted with the downright wrong, we also can reach into Scripture, that well-



spring of our spiritual tradition. Like Jesus, we can remember Scripture and be strengthened. Here's a few Scripture passages to remember:

"...do justice and... love kindness, and... walk humbly with your God."

"...love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind."

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

"Let love be genuine, hate what is evil."

"Seek first the kingdom of God..."

"Love one another."

"You shall not steal."

"Hold fast to what is good..."

"Help the suffering, honor all people."

"Be kind to one another."

When we reach into Scripture – the words we hear every week in church, the passages we discuss in Bible study, the chapter we read before bed – whenever we open the Bible, we need to understand clearly what this thing called “the Bible” is..., and what it is not.

First, the Bible is not “just another piece of literature.” Scripture bears unique authority for us, an authority unlike any other writing. We even name the Bible “the word of God.” That does not mean God literally spoke it or dictated it into the ears of writers who were nothing more than secretaries. A cast of human beings wrote the Bible, but they did so inspired by the Spirit. God did not whisper the words of the Book of Matthew into Matthew’s ear. Matthew, coaxed by the Spirit, wrote his book based on what he or others had seen God do in Jesus Christ. His book’s truth is not necessarily literal; it’s deep, subtle, spiritual truth. Presbyterians, indeed most Christians, are not Biblical literalists. But not taking all the Bible literally *doesn't* mean we don't take it seriously.

Secondly, the Bible is not simple. We live in a world that often wants its truth simple – factoids compressed into digestible sound bites that distort the deep, subtle and complex realities of life as it is. But God *is not* simple, and human



condition *is not* simple. Hearing the Bible is demanding; reading the Bible is demanding; preaching the Bible is demanding. Scripture takes time and work; it invites hard conversation and sincere prayer to bring it home. I wish I could tell you to go to the Bible, close your eyes, open it anywhere and plop your finger down on the page and *voila* – the answer to your dilemma. I gotta tell you, I've been reading my Bible for 60 years, and I still haven't figured it all out. I've not begun to unearth all its riches. It still surprises me.

Thirdly remember that the Bible is not mere comfort. Sometimes it *does* comfort... when comfort is what you need. But sometimes it discomfords... when discomfort is what you need. Nobody likes to be discomforted, but ironically, divine discomfort can actually be a gift. It can goad us out of old habits, push us beyond easy assumptions, all toward life that is higher and deeper than mere ease.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, when you and I are trying to figure life out, Scripture is the God-given window into the deep mysteries of it all. Or another metaphor – think of it as an anchor. Scripture is like an anchor sunk deep in good holding ground, keeping the ship off the shoals in a blow. Or think of it as a deep root. Scripture is like the taproot of an oak, sunk deep to reach groundwater. Or think of it as a foundation. Scripture is like the foundation of the house of life that we're forever building.

Tom Long, one of the finest preachers I know, once told me a tale about a high school play he'd been in when he was a kid. It's a story about being tempted..., and remembering who you are.

This play was being directed by a new teacher to Tom's high school, a young woman fresh out of teachers' college, full of energy and enthusiasm. She was out to direct the best high school play ever. She worked with the kids week after week, fitting costumes, blocking out the movements, and, of course, helping them memorize their lines. Her zeal was contagious, and by the time opening night rolled around, the whole cast believed in themselves. The night was electric, the school auditorium packed, charged with anticipation.



All went well at first... until the middle of the second act. Then, one of the lead players forgot a line. It was obvious, the auditorium fell silent. Sitting at the foot of the stage, the young teacher/director whispered the forgotten words to the student... but he either didn't hear or didn't pay attention. The silence from the stage grew ever more awkward. In desperation, unable to remember his words, the kid adlibbed a line... he just made something up.

The audience was relieved, the line was clever enough, and it got a laugh, a good laugh the kid enjoyed..., so he made up another line. There was laughter again, but less laughter this time. After delivering his third fabricated line, there was nothing in the auditorium but silence and embarrassment. Tom remembers looking down at the foot of the stage to where the young teacher was sitting, watching her play. He said he saw tears streaming down her cheeks.

“The one who throws everything all over the place” is forever tempting us to make up our own lines, just make ‘em up – maybe for what we imagine to be success, or maybe just to please the crowd. But we have our lines, good lines. All we have to do is reach into Scripture and remember them. Here’s a few that come to mind:

"...Do justice and... love kindness, and... walk humbly with your God."

"...Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind."

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

"Let love be genuine, hate what is evil."

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"Help the suffering, honor all people."

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.