

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

First Sunday in Lent – February 14, 2016

Theme for Lent: “Plotting the Resurrection”

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Luke 4:1-13

REFLECTION

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know.

But when you listen, you may learn something new.”

- Dalai Lama, Buddhist spiritual leader of Tibet

**“Always consider the source of your advice. Advice cannot be neutral,
the source of advice is just as important as actual words.”**

— Gamal Hennessy, American author

Consider the Source

The 40 Days in the Wilderness story is typical of ancient, heroic biographies. The hero has a miraculous birth, goes through an ordeal and begins his life mission. So this is an ordeal story.

This is also Midrash – so the 40 days is meant to echo the 40 day fasts of both Moses and Elijah – and the 40 years that Israel was “tested” in the wilderness.

This story timeline in Luke moves Jesus from his well-attended baptism in the Jordan to this empty time of temptation in the brush. Essentially, the Holy Spirit enters from above, a voice from heaven says,

‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ – Luke 3:22

And the next day that same Spirit leads him out into the rather inhospitable moors for a 40-day experiment – hearing a voice that is from the opposite direction from heaven. Talk about your rapid descent from spiritual high to spiritual low.

This Devil character as a supernatural personification of evil – fallen angel – arch enemy of G-d and humankind – doesn’t exist in mainstream Judaism. He’s a Christian and Islamic construction. And my son is fascinated with him. His response to my reassurances that he doesn’t exist is, “But maybe he DOES exist.” In these days and times I’m tempted to agree with him. But theologically I can’t condone it. So – he will remain a fictional character of Christian construction who builds character in our hero.

So, first Jesus hears a voice from heaven calling him “beloved” and affirming his worth. Then he hears the voice of temptation – tempering his spirit – and testing his commitment to the One G-d. He’s tempted with bread in the midst of hunger. He’s tempted with power over all the people he is hoping to transform into compassionate forces for good. He’s tempted to test G-d just as he is being tested by the Devil. To all of these offers Jesus responds with quotations from Deuteronomy – the fifth book of the Torah – said at the time to have been written by Moses – and claiming to be comprehensive and divinely sanctioned instructions for life. Jesus basically resorts to covenantal language – affirming that he’s sticking with the voice from heaven and eschewing the voice from the moors.

It’s helpful to have a hero who is proven to be loyal to the forces of Good. It simplifies things. Kazantzakis in his novel *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST* offers a more ambivalent Jesus – pointing out that temptation arises throughout life and we are asked to prove our loyalties again and again – even in our dying moments. You can see why this was a controversial point of view in some Christian circles – those circles dedicated to unambiguous commitment to a particular creedal interpretation.

Being completely obsessed with raising my son to be a Good Person I find myself shamefacedly expecting Peter’s unambiguous loyalty to my point of view – only to be corrected by his insistence that there are several interpretations to consider – including those that benefit and appear “good” to him. He would do well as a Rabbi. Or a lawyer, heaven forbid.

So, back to this ordeal story and the possible meanings it might have for us right now as we begin to “plot the resurrection” which is expected to come at the end of Lent.

Something to keep in mind is that the mythology of Lucifer – who has become synonymous with the Devil in Christian lore – is derived from the Hebrew – a name meaning “shining one, light bearer” – and from the Greek “bringer of dawn”, another name for the morning star. Interesting that Christ is also referred to as the bright morning star, bringer of light. Lucifer, as the myth developed, was beautiful and a favorite of G-d but fell from grace. Jesus, the opposite, remained a favorite of G-d’s.

This myth has given us a wonderful metaphor for the appearance of evil temptation in life: it has a pretty face. If evil always looked like the monster it is, we would be repulsed. But it usually looks good to us – like a lovely red, tasty apple hanging from a forbidden tree – or at least neutral – like the kid next door who is stockpiling guns for a shootout at the movie theatre.

We are usually tempted by beauty – bright colored candy that can harm our bodies – power that would enable us to do great good in the world (that can also do much harm in the world) – that beautiful flower that contains poison. Children are lured into the clutches of pedophiles by the presence of puppies or promises of gifts – or a familiar, beloved face. Promises of eternal love have lured the best of us into relationships we've come to regret.

The Monty Python bunch made a frightening movie called BRAZIL – in which the face of evil wore the innocent mask of a baby. Enough said.

Our story today doesn't say that the Devil appeared in the guise of the Holy Spirit – using a voice from heaven familiar to our baptized boy. But it could be imagined that way – adding confusion to the ordeal – weakening Jesus' resistance to the arduous verbal assault on his core values.

Perhaps one of our lessons from this story is that we need to consider the source – figure out whose voice we are hearing – where these temptations and questions are coming from – and align ourselves with the forces for good. There are a zillion voices coming at us over the airwaves and social media, in the political arena and religious circles.

There are voices in our heads that were put there by our parents and teachers – and other voices that have wormed their way in from more nefarious sources. There are the voices of intuition that have come to us from our ancestors and our DNA and our G-d.

And there are the voices of our Reptilian brain – that have a tendency to be reactive – protective – fearful – irrational.

There are voices from the planet, our environment – warning us, warming us, leading us into inconvenient yet necessary actions. And just this week it was announced we heard a voice from a billion light-years ago – the sound of two black holes colliding.

The New York Times reported on Thursday:

That faint rising tone, physicists say, is the first direct evidence of gravitational waves, the ripples in the fabric of space-time that Einstein predicted a century ago. It completes his vision of a universe in which space and time are interwoven and dynamic, able to stretch, shrink and jiggle. And it is a ringing confirmation of the nature of black holes, the bottomless gravitational pits from which not even light can escape, which were the most foreboding...part of his theory.

More generally, it means that a century of innovation, testing, questioning and plain hard work after Einstein imagined it on paper, scientists have finally tapped into the deepest register of physical reality, where the weirdest and wildest implications of Einstein's universe become manifest.

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/science/ligo-gravitational-waves-black-holes-einstein.html?_r=0

I believe this with all my heart – and trust the sources – not only the New York Times – but all those scientists. And I hear in this the voice of G-d continuing to amaze us with the powers of creation and destruction and recreation in our – OUR – universe.

In all cases, we need to consider the sources of what we are hearing and thinking – and the contexts in which we are hearing these things – and how any of it lines up with the values we have chosen to live by.

If we are plotting a revolution or a resurrection – the transformation of a conflicted world into a beloved community – we might want to consider the temptation to be cultic and cliquish – the temptation to surround ourselves with like-minded people, lose perspective and end up declaring war on the wrong perceived enemy – or committing suicide by our own short-sightedness.

The story today tells me to consider the source of what I am hearing – and respond accordingly. I urge you to do the same – on Sunday as well as any other day.

And as much as I find it annoying – as much as I am tempted to expect blind obedience – I want my son – all our children – to do the same.

May it be so.

Luke 4:1-13

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.