

“The Problem with Cousin Tom’s Gall Bladder”

Luke 4:1-13

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
First Sunday of Lent, March 10th, 2019
Matt Matthews

On Tuesday night, Rachel and I got word that our Cousin Tom was being rushed by ambulance from the small hospital in their hometown of Silver City, New Mexico, to Memorial Hospital in Las Cruzas, two hours away. There was no room in the ambulance for his wife of five-hundred years—Consuelo and Tom have been married forever— and because she cannot drive at night, she was left behind.

Consuelo was left behind alone until morning.

The next night, on Ash Wednesday, at our beautiful service here in this sanctuary, I quoted from a sermon written by Peter Gomes, the late chaplain of Memorial Chapel at Harvard.

[The cross] stands to remind us of the troubles of the world that placed our Savior upon it for sins that he did not commit. . . . [W]e Christians ought to expect trouble, turmoil, and tribulation as the normal course of life . . . God does not spare us from turmoil . . . God strengthens us for turmoil.

He preached those words twelve days after the horror of 911.

During our Ash Wednesday service, we reflected upon making the sign of the cross on each other’s foreheads with ashes—ashes that remind us, among other things, of our need to repent, to apologize, or, as my mother used to say, *to straighten up and fly right*. Ashes remind us of how beautiful life on this earth is but how fleeting, how fleeting, and how we always end up gathered around a grave. Ashes remind us of our death, how we have limits—hard and real—and how God is not limited, least of all by death.

There is nothing sugar coated on Ash Wednesday, is there?

But ashes remind us that God took the stuff of stardust and mud, formed it with his bare hands, and blew life into it,¹ creating us and delighting in us, redeeming us, claiming us, and loving us through all eternity. This love is as real as any grave, and it transcends every death, every treason, every sorrow.

“O Lord, you have made us very small, and we bring our years to an end like a tale that is told; help us to remember that beyond our brief day is the eternity of your love.”

¹ This is a nod to James Weldon Johnson’s *The Creation*, from *God’s Trombones*.

(Reinhold Niebuhr, 1892-1971)

This good news of God's eternal love for us surely and amazingly encourages us. But it does not diminish the reality that our lives on this earth are filled with a certain amount of suffering. Jesus, in fact, invites us to carry the cross, a plain invitation to make sacrifices—sacrifices that may cause us pain—for the good of others. God's call requires us to bear God's love to the whole wide world, and that means kneeling with those who suffer. It means mending what has become shattered. It means weeping with those who weep. It means waiting, waiting alone through the night as your beloved is jostled at high speed in an ambulance on a dark night on highway 180 across the desert to the possibility of a greater hope in some gleaming medical center in Las Cruzas.

Certainly, Jesus himself was comforted by God's eternal love in his own desert of suffering. After his baptism and before his ministry began, we read that the "he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil."

As Jesus suffers through his fast (Luke says he ate nothing for these long 40 days), the devil conveniently appears offering Jesus a short cut out of the wilderness.² But Jesus knew that short cuts wouldn't cut it. So, he stayed his course.

We are tempted to take short cuts to. We are tempted to sell our soul for the easy way out. When we are invited to bear the cross, we often look to somebody else to carry our share. When God asks us, "Will you make this sacrifice in order to make somebody else's life a little better?" wouldn't we rather step up than step aside?

When Jesus's trial is over and the devil had completed his tests, our passage ends on this ominous note: "the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time." So, the readers of Luke know, even if Jesus doesn't, that Jesus will suffer again. This terrible line—*the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time*—reminds us that Jesus will once again experience brokenness and torment.

Dare I say it (?)—*just like us*.

And I suppose that was God's point. God became incarnate in Jesus to walk with us, and how on earth could he ever do that if he didn't suffer with us? The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reminds us that God is to be found where God is most needed: in trouble, in adversity, in ambulances zooming through the desert at night, even in death.

We may sometimes wonder, is the Psalmist right?

*"God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble?"*

I say, yes. Of course, the Psalmist is right . . .

*"2 Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*

² If Jesus was, as the church affirms, both fully human and fully divine, these temptations were real, and difficult, and heavy.

*3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (Psalm 46).³*

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It is interesting to note that Mark tells the story of Jesus' temptation a little differently. The Spirit doesn't "lead" Jesus into the wilderness, it "drives" him there, which is how I'd go: kicking and screaming. And at the end of the story in Mark and Matthew's gospel we read that after Jesus withstood the devil's temptations and after the devil had left, angels came to Jesus and took care of him. Those differences are not slight, and I like Matthew and Mark's version better.

But today we are left with Luke's version, and that ominous line about the devil lurking ever near, ready to return at an opportune time. I'm not scared one bit of the devil, but I do not relish the truth that suffering will once again visit my family and yours, and that our faith will be made stronger not in a hot tub but on an anvil.

I'm not ready to sign up for another season of adversity, but, like it or not, it will surely come. It will come, indeed, but I take comfort (and you will remind me later) in the fact that adversity will not last. Adversity lasts for only a season. By the grace of God, I will come out on the other side, with you, rejoicing that the struggle has ended and that the night, finally, is over, and God's new day has dawned, and we will have more opportunities in this life and the next to praise God from whom all blessings flow.

* * *

You'll be glad to know that Tom's high fever, pain, and delirium were not caused by a terminal disease, but by tiny stones that blocked his common bile duct, and that his gall bladder, now removed, will cause him no future pain. Other things, unfortunately, will cause pain, and one day death. But not his gall bladder.

Thanks be to God for Jesus the Christ, who, by the power of God's Spirit, walks with us through desert-times of trouble—all the way to the other side.

AMEN.

³ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city;^[b] it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.^[c]

Luke 4:1-13 1Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where 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. 3The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And 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. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

9Then 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, 10for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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