

Giving Up The Good To Embrace The Best

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 6, 2022

based on Luke 4:1-13

Temptation is the subject heading this morning. Catholic priest, Kenny Moore tells the following personal story about it:

One of my first assignments as a newly ordained priest was the hear confessions at a local boy's high school. I was nervous when the first young man entered the confessional and whispered, "Bless me father, for I have sinned, I had impure thoughts."

Relieved that the sin was something I could handle, I assured him that having sexual thoughts was a normal part of adolescents, but that he should not act upon them.

"Did you entertain these thoughts," I asked.

"No, Father," he said, "They entertained me."

Well, that is temptation in a nutshell but I don't really think that is what the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness is about. Jesus's story is not in the least trite and is, in fact, infinitely more interesting. Allow me to lay some ground.

The wonderful French painter, Pierre Bonnard, it is said, would sometimes sneak like a burglar into the houses of people who bought his paintings and repaint something in the "finished" painting that would not let go of him. He once persuaded a friend to distract one of the guards in a museum while he quickly touched up a work of his that had been completed long before.

One more story is told that is harder to believe, that on his death bed, he told his artist son to sneak into the house of someone who had purchased one of his works and change something that was still eating at him. His son, it is said, did, but found that to modify the painting according to his father's wishes, he would have had to paint over his father's signature.

In any case, Bonnard was one of the lucky to have his work bought, museum-ed, and celebrated, but he was of the peculiar temperament that could not settle for being good, being praised – he would not settle for anything but being his absolute best.

I want to talk about that impulse today because this morning's text leads me to believe that Jesus was similarly compelled and that to understand his temptations one needs to wrestle with this conundrum.

Fresh from his baptism he is driven into the wilderness where he faces the very demons that will define his ministry. Contrary to popular belief about the temptations, Jesus faces choices that are NOT between the good and the bad, but between the good and the best.

Consider: the things Satan offered to do for Jesus. They don't seem so awful when you think about it. Turning a rock into a piece of bread when you are hungry?

What's so terribly wrong about that? We're only human; we all need to eat. This appalling war in Ukraine (a breadbasket country) threatens many with starvation. If you could make bread out of a rock, why not do it?

Well, he would not turn stones to bread because though he knew that people need bread to eat, people live by more than bread alone.

To be really alive and vibrant, people need purpose and meaning; something to be passionate about; something worth giving one's life for.

In the second temptation, the devil shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world in a vision, and says that, if he likes, he would see to it that the kingdoms were given to him.

You have to wonder, why not do it?

What could have been better for the world than if Jesus had taken the reins of world government right then and there? Not such a bad thing. Looking again at Ukraine today, who would not be forgiven for wishing Jesus had taken him up on it.

But, no, Jesus would not bow down to the devil's authority in order to rule the world even according to God's dictates. Well, allegiance gotten from people without their free will is no allegiance worth having.

Finally, the devil tempted Jesus to jump off a tall building. To what purpose? To prove to those who might doubt it that Jesus was someone special. Why not do it?

Haven't evangelically minded Christians through the centuries been saddled with the task of convincing a doubting world that Jesus was special? Why couldn't he have made the job a little easier with a few acrobatics off the pinnacle of the temple?

Why? Because Jesus refused to water down his cosmic calling. He would not turn being the Son of God into some ridiculous circus act in order to please a few extra followers who wanted him to be like the magician, David Copperfield or Philippe Petit.

In short, three times Satan tempted Jesus with the most insidious of temptations, the temptation to do what on the surface APPEARS to be attractive and good.

But to pander to that which appears to be good meant that he would have to bypass the excellent, and he could not do that.

Once again, the most difficult choices in this life are not between good and evil; no, they are those choices between the good and the best.

Jesus was tempted to settle for half-measures, but that would mean settling for being someone he was not.

Consider the following fable:

A man found a stray eagle's egg one day, and put it in a nest of a barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.

All his life the eagle did what the barnyard chicks did, thinking he was a barnyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents with scarcely a beat on his strong golden wings. The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked. "That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth - we're only chickens." So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was. (Anthony de Mello)

Jesus decided to be an eagle right out of the chute.

Such things take courage. They involve weighty choices that involve matters of character. Consider a single day in the life of president, John F. Kennedy.

The day: June 10, 1963.

That morning the president woke up in Honolulu where he had been addressing the U.S. Conference of Mayors the day before. Tensions and some violence over racial matters were erupting all over the country. The mayors were on the front lines of these battles.

From Honolulu, the president flew to San Francisco where Air Force One picked up Ted Sorenson, the president's senior speechwriter. They were on their way to American University in Washington D.C. where the president would give the commencement address late that morning.

That address is considered to be Kennedy's greatest speech. In it, for the first time, he questioned the assumptions of the cold war.

Maybe atomic war with the Soviet Union, something most people took for granted as an eventuality, wasn't inevitable after all. Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev had developed mutual respect since the time of the Cuban missile crisis the year before.

They had also established a hot line, having come so close to ending the world as we know it. Kennedy felt the moment was ripe for reaching out to the Russians.

He summed it all up with these final words: *For in the final analysis, our most basic common link, is that we all inhabit this small planet, we all breathe the same air, we all cherish our children's futures, and we are all mortal.*

After the speech he came back to the White House to find that Gov. George Wallace was standing in the door of the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, trying to prevent two black students from entering the university.

Around noon the president signed what was called, The Equal Pay Act (EPA), which prohibited, in his words, “the unconscionable practice of paying female employees less wages than male employees for the same job.” At the time, one in three American workers was a woman--25 million women in all--many of whom were working mothers and/or the sole breadwinner in their family. Despite this, women earned on average 59 cents to the dollar earned by men in the same job.

The crisis at the University of Alabama took most of Kennedy's attention that day.

He was reticent to do anything. He didn't want to alienate Southern Democrats, but his brother, Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, insisted that it was time to take a stand. He said the president shouldn't go on merely bowing meaninglessly in the direction of civil rights. The times called for action.

The blacks thought he was with them from his rhetoric, while the white segregationists thought he was secretly with them because it was all rhetoric and he'd done nothing about it. A choice had to be made because George Wallace was forcing that choice.

President Kennedy took his brother's advice and went on TV that night and gave what is remembered as another great speech given with almost no notes. He said that this was not a political question, it was not a question of legislation; it was a moral question, a question that he posed this way: "What kind of people are we? We as a people say we believe in equality, yet who among us would choose to be black?"

A field secretary for the NAACP, Medgar Evers, a black man, was on his way to a meeting that night in Jackson, Mississippi. When he heard the speech on his car radio and he was so excited by it he turned his car around to go home to tell his children what it meant – that for the first time, a president of the United States had taken a stand on civil rights. Medgar Evers was shot to death that night on his porch ... and the president had that to deal with the next day.

The president had been dragging his feet on all these issues for the first two years of his administration, issues he felt strongly about privately. Would he be an eagle or a chicken, as it were? Would he stand up for his own principles?

You know, sometimes we need someone else's example of moral courage to remind us of what the excellent really is and to disabuse us of our self-satisfaction when our thinking becomes jaded or we become inured to mediocrity.

David Brooks' column in the New York Times on Friday sheds a tremendous amount of light on this. I hope you saw it.

The events in Ukraine have been a moral atrocity and a political tragedy, but for people around the world, a cultural revelation. It's not that people around the world believe new things, but many of us have been reminded what we believe, and we believe it with more fervor, with more conviction. This has been a convicting week.

The Ukrainians have been our instructors and inspirers. They've been the ordinary men and women lining up to get weapons to defend their homeland. They've been the lady telling a Russian invader to put sunflower seeds in his pocket.

They've been the thousands of Ukrainians who had been living comfortably abroad, who surged back into the country to risk death to defend their people and way of life.

We owe them such a debt. They have reminded us not only what it looks like to believe in democracy, the liberal order and national honor but also to act bravely on behalf of these things.

They've reminded us that you can believe things with greater and lesser intensity, faintly, with words, or deeply and fervently, with a conviction in your bones. They've reminded us how much the events of the past few years have conspired to weaken our faith in ourselves. They've reminded us how the setbacks and humiliations (Donald Trump, Afghanistan, racial injustice, political dysfunction) have caused us to doubt and be passive about the gospel of democracy. But despite all our failings [that] gospel is still glowingly true.

This has been a week of restored faith. In what exactly? Well, in the first place, in leadership. We've seen so many leadership failures of late, but over the past week Volodymyr Zelensky emerged as the everyman leader — the guy in the T-shirt, the Jewish comedian, the guy who didn't flee but knew what to say: "I need ammunition, not a ride."

It wasn't only Zelensky. Joe Biden masterly and humbly helped organize a global coalition. Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany understood the moment. So did Emmanuel Macron of France and Fumio Kishida of Japan.

There's been restored faith in true patriotism. Over the past few years, we've seen so much sour ethnonationalism from the right, an angry and xenophobic form of patriotism. From the left we've seen a disdain of patriotism, from people who vaguely support abstract national ideals while showing limited gratitude toward one's own inheritance; people who rightly focus on national crimes but while slighting national achievements ...

The Ukrainians have shown us how the right kind of patriotism is ennobling, a source of meaning and a reason to risk life. They've shown us that the love of a particular place, their own land and people, warts and all, can be part and parcel of a love for universal ideals, like democracy, liberalism and freedom.

There's been a restored faith in the West, in liberalism, in our community of nations. There has been so much division of late, within and between nations. But now I wake up in the morning, pick up my phone and am cheered that Sweden is providing military aid to Ukraine, and I'm awed by what the German people now support. The fact is that many democratic nations reacted to the atrocity with the same sense of resolve.

The same is true at home. Of course, there are bitter partisans who use the moment to attack the left for being weak, or to accuse the right of being pro-Putin. There are always going to be people who are happy to be factually inaccurate if it will make them socially divisive. But at this point almost every member of Congress is united about our general cause.

That's because we have learned to revile that which people for centuries took for granted — that big countries would gobble up small countries, that the powerful would do what they could and that the weak would suffer what they must. This week, perhaps, we've come to value more highly our modern liberal ethic.

There's been a mood of democratic pessimism, as authoritarianism has spread and strutted. Academics of left and right have criticized liberalism. This week we have a clearer view of the alternative. It looks like Vladimir Putin ... The creed of liberalism is getting a second wind.

Things will likely get even more brutal for the Ukrainians. But the moral flame they fueled this week may, in the end, still burn strong.

Once again, Jesus was Jesus because among other things, he knew the difference between the truly great and the merely good. He captured the moment. Like the Ukrainian people, he rose to the occasion.

Bring the little you have, the little you are, to me says Jesus, and if you are intent on being or becoming who you really can be, I will help you make that into something beautiful.

Amen