



Wilderness Hell by Leroy Almon, Sr.

ASH WEDNESDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Luke 4:1-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, (v. 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. (v. 3) The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” (v. 4) Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” (v. 5) Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. (v. 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. (v. 7) If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” (v. 8) Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” (v. 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, (v. 10) for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,

to protect you,' (v. 11) and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" (v. 12) Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (v. 13) When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Ash Wednesday is the seventh Wednesday before Easter and the first day of Lent, a forty-day period of spiritual reflection, penitence, and personal introspection. Commonly linked to Roman Catholicism and practiced beginning in the Middle Ages, Ash Wednesday services have become an adopted practice in several communities of faith. Christians who participate in the advent of Lent strive to express their faithfulness to Christ. Corporate gatherings in solemn Christian worship set the tone for congregants to name their frailties, confess their sins, and find a supportive assembly of sisters and brothers who likewise shoulder the burdens of the human condition and thus must seek the help of God.

In ritual observances conducted in some African American congregations, clergypersons invite worshippers (church leaders and laity) forward to have ashes (in a few cases these ashes are the residual of palm leaves preserved from Palm Sunday of the previous year) placed on their foreheads to remind them of Jesus Christ's costly sacrifice on their behalf. The anticipated response is that this act will instigate in the believer a sense of deep contrition and reflection on the believer's own mortality.

But this response indicates only one facet of what is evidenced in black church¹ liturgical practices. For many African Americans, Ash Wednesday is not merely a solemn, contemplative season; an undercurrent of celebration, even if in silence, may be sensed. Confession to and reflection on a personal God in the person of Jesus Christ is a known and owned story. Thus, for these who have indwelled the story, they see Lent as merely a pregnant pause in the story that will ultimately speak to them freedom's word. The motif of costly suffering in black church practices tends to collapse into one on liberation. The powerful motif, it seems to me, is the central claim that suffering and oppression can be woven into redemptive purposes of God, which is to say that the other side of suffering is cause for celebration of one's emancipation from suffering life-threatening shackles.

In the emancipation from and remembrance of the horrors of American slavery, there is nearly always a tie made to Israel's Exodus and wilderness preparation saga and the suffering Christ. This usual connection reveals the black church's embrace of themes of justice and freedom. Freedom comes as joy in the morning. The death defying acts connected to Christ's faithfulness in the barren badlands of the soul and wilderness, to use the words of Gardner Taylor, is substance of both a sensed sorrow and at once a sensed liberation from sorrow's reward. **Black Christians are (perhaps) newcomers to the more commonly seen liturgical practices normed by our white Christian brothers and sisters in America during Lent, and specifically Ash Wednesday. But, it is clear to me, that the substance of what the season means has long been articulated and felt through the powerful motifs of sorrow and liberation in the communal story of African American Christians.**

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 4:1-13

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Temptation is the gateway to the dark side of our mortal humanity. In our hyper-capitalistic and doggedly individualistic society, it is not difficult to recognize places where corners have been cut or promises made and broken by people. The temptation to go numb towards the life-giving resources of grace while ignoring the cost of discipleship seems to be the prevailing attitude within and without the confines of the church's sanctuary. Any commitment that would require personal sacrifice, human touch, or empathetic listening is rare.

I saw the 2006 Best Picture Crash, featuring a top-notch ensemble cast. In my judgment, its plot profoundly depicts our troublesome reality today. Crash's plot unfolds by shifting between five to six groups of seemingly unconnected characters, whose relationships to each other are only revealed at the movie's end. While the movie's plot is complex, its premise is simple: people are born with good hearts, but they grow up and learn prejudices. The movie exploits the notion that bigotry and racial stereotypes do not exist. What is finally revealed is that we can go through most of life without touching one another, but ultimately we crash into one another. To crash is the inevitable consequence of moving through life disconnected from community, meaningful relationships, etc., and perhaps in a confident self-driven way, without a true sense of moral purpose. For the Christian, it is the fruit of being seduced by a culture that numbs one to a true sense of God and how this sense is wholly significant to our self-identity. As the movie's tagline goes, we think we know who we are when we really have no idea.

Ash Wednesday beckons us to stop and give pause to the reality that our very lives belong to God because we are just mere mortals. To participate in the ritual remembrances of one who endured the temptations presented in the wilderness is the starting point of recognizing Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. In this season, the emphasis on God's desire of contrite (good) hearts is also God's desire that our hearts will be reset to get us to Easter Sunday. This Lenten commencement day signifies God's availability and hope toward total intimacy with us in our own mortal struggle in spiritual wildernesses.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Luke 4: 1-13 is an important passage about Jesus' spiritual preparation for ministry. The Scripture text is situated between Luke's account of Jesus' baptism under the ministry of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (3:1, 4:14).

The wonder-working power of the Spirit over temptation is the central theological upshot of Luke 4:13. Full of the Spirit, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit and put to the test. He has hunger pangs and the devil, the enemy of God, yields him no mercy. Three different tests of Jesus' faithfulness as Son of God are posed by the devil. They are the temptation: 1) of physical nourishment (bread); 2) to obtain unrivaled power; and, 3) to prove one's self. The devil's ingenuity is to be respected in this text; in no way does it ever appear that Jesus gets a free pass.

Spiritual warfare is the complication that swells and swells at each verse. With each temptation presented, one finds a scriptural rejoinder. In verse three, the devil first propositions Jesus with a dare, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus’ reply is simply that only spiritual bread can satisfy the deepest hunger. Then the second temptation from the devil comes as the presentation of power which the devil has no authority to give to the Son of God. Leading him up to a high point, he shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and then whispers, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority...if you will worship me” (v. 5-6). Again, Jesus answers the devil’s unreliable promises with Scripture.

So far, the devil has appealed to his appetite and his eyesight. In the temptation of bread and the temptation of power, Jesus disarms the devil with Scripture. But in the last contest, says one commentator, the devil uses Scripture in his temptation. Having now taken Jesus up to the pinnacle of Jerusalem’s temple, he says to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. . . He will command his angels concerning you to protect you. . . they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” The devil even quotes Scripture, too. Curiously enough, sometimes the devil’s quotes are found in the words of preachers. But these devilish words do not prevail in this context.

In verse 12, at the end, Jesus is triumphant over temptation. But, Luke suggests to us that the devil will later wage a counterattack. The devil, licking his wounds, departs from Jesus until a more opportune time. Jesus’ confrontation with the enemy is not over. Gethsemane’s darkness and Calvary’s bloodied episode bear this out. “The frightening import of the text,” says Peter Gomes, “is that in reality it was just the beginning.”² So, if we are not spiritually readied for the wilderness, what lurks therein will get the best of us. Spiritual readiness is to know why the wilderness must be endured with the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit for, when driven into the wilderness without a sense of our divine purpose, we crash.

Celebration

Through Jesus, we can triumph over any temptation. So that we can discern the active presence of God in times of temptation, we recognize our human limitations and trust in the faithfulness of God to safeguard us from the snare of the one who would have us fail to achieve our divine purposes. We also celebrate the victory obtained through the work of the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not mean the absence of temptation but victory in spite of it. Thankfully, when we enter the wilderness, the Spirit is available to teach and guide us. The work of the Spirit and leaning on the Word provide a consummate strategy to resist the devil’s schemes. Praise God we are not alone.

Descriptive Details

Some of the descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The barren wilderness; a physically fatigued Jesus; images of food; the stone the devil wants Jesus to turn to bread; the pinnacle of the temple; the devil departing for a season; and

Sounds: The wind, listen to the devil tempt Jesus and hear Jesus’ response.

III. Other Sermonic Recommendations

- One might envision shaping the text in a sermon imagining the preacher/teacher offering a course on the subject of temptation, where participants are evaluated on their responses to a series of tests.
- Sermon by Prathia Hall. “Between the Wilderness and the Cliff.” Luke 4:14-15, 20, 28-30; published in The African American Pulpit. (Fall 2005): pp. 44-48. Also available on CD in this volume.
- It may be helpful to organize a roundtable discussion about temptation concerning different constituencies in one’s church to get a fresh reading of the times.
- Do a comparative analysis of Luke’s account and Matthew’s account of this story.

Notes

1. “The black church” as Alton B. Pollard aptly expresses, “is analytical shorthand for the vast network of racial-ethnic communities of Christian faith, worship, and life born out of and informed by the historic and present day experiences of people of African descent, no matter the tradition and wherever they may be found.” The Weekly Word. Vol. XXXI, Issue 2. Howard University School of Divinity.
2. Gomes, Peter J. “An Opportune Time.” Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998. p. 53.