

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

February 14, 2016

“Awake and Alert”

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit ...
was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.”
Luke 4:1

Prelude

This morning our thoughts turn to
the season of Lent -
a time designed to deepen our
understanding of Christian faith,
and to amplify our Christian endeavors.

For the Christian, the season of Lent
is a **“face up”** time (John H. Westerhoff, III).
Just as Jesus **“set his face”** to go to Jerusalem,
so too do we strive to **“face up”**
to what time is ours.

John Westerhoff speaks of our need to
**“face up to the struggle to acknowledge
who we really are and the continuing battle
with powers and principalities ... that prevent
us from actualizing our true identify.”**

He continues:
we need **“face up”** to our blurred visions,
misplaced loyalties, and wrongful desires;
and **“face up”** to our blindness and
to the healing and nourishment we need;
to **“face up”** to the ways in which we are
bound and trapped from being
our most authentic selves.”

Lent, the **“face up”** season,
encourages altered behavior.

It is an exploration time,
to ponder well what we are doing with
God’s gift of life, to thoughtfully embrace
novelty
for the improvement of our manners.

Lent is an opportunity for
the body of Christ,
to embrace change,
not for the sake of change,
but to permit new vistas, news experiences,
new understandings that come to those
who follow in the way of Jesus.

Lent is a time to experiment;
give alms, pray, fast (see Matthew 6:1-21),
not to be seen or impress others,
but to discover something about ourself
and what we treasure.

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Change.

During Lent we mix things up a bit.
Worship looks and sounds slightly different.
We sing different songs.
We hope to be available and receptive,
that we might listen to the God who
comes to us with gospel.

In his book, *Being Christian*,
Rowan Williams, makes an interesting
observation - "**Christian life is a
listening life. Christians are people
who expect to be spoken to by God**"
(R. Williams, *Being Christian*, p. 21).

Consider you life as a listening life.
To scripture. To song. In silence.
To friend. To foe. Listen to be informed.
Listen so as to grow.

So - consider altering one's steps.

Sit in a different pew;

park in a different lot;

shift from clockwise to
counter clockwise
when passing the peace;

enter and exit the church
in another way, a different way;

pray your way through the newspaper;

turn off the presidential debates;

double your money to your favorite charity,
and if you don't have one, find one;

end a grudge, reconcile with an adversary;

turn off the presidential debates;

read a book by Philip Gulley;

enroll in Plymouth University.

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Our theme for Lent:

Awake and Alert -

for Love and Work.

Inspiration for this can be traced
to a hymn we sometimes sing:

“Awake, Awake to Love and Work” (*NCH*, No. 89),
and the verse of Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy.

He was a famed chaplain in the Great War (WWI),
and became an ardent professor of what we
would call the social gospel. This particular
verse appeared in his book titled
The Sorrows of God and Other Poems.

Awake and alert.

**“Let the love of Jesus come and
set your soul ablaze.”**

Awake and alert. This is what is required of us, if
we are to be participants in the gospel
of God's love for the world.

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In our scripture lesson this morning,
we heard that Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit,
and having been led by the Spirit,
was led into the wilderness, where
he was tempted by the devil.

Jesus was a long time in the wilderness.
Forty days we read. That translates into “long time.”
He denied himself comforts in the wilderness.
He “**ate nothing at all**” we read.
So he was hungry. Depleted. Vulnerable.

Enter the devil - in a cameo appearance -
who plays a fascinating role.

The devil has no power,
other than to suggest and to entice.
The devil is more an administrator
of a test that defines character;
more an interrogator than antagonist.

The testing in the wilderness is actually
a testing of Jesus’ baptism.
You recall the baptism:
the Spirit falls fresh on Jesus,
like a dove. And a voice from heaven speaks:
**“You are my Son, my Beloved,
with you I am well pleased.”**

The testing/tempting is
a honing of this experience,
a sharpening of Jesus’ mind,
a sifting/sorting of life
based upon baptismal knowledge and experience,
the affirmation of being loved by God,
with a life in which God is pleased to dwell.

I assume some of us may have had similar
testing moments. We are told: God loves you.

But then we ask:
Does God love me?
I don’t feel particularly loveable.

We may have been told -
you are fearfully and wonderfully made,
a child of God!

Is this so?
Am I wonderfully made,
a child of God?
I've been called so much worse.

This is all part of what it means to wrestle with
God, to listen, to grapple with the gospel entrusted
to our care.

I recall so many years ago in a confirmation class
being asked two questions, one following another:
How do you know your sins are forgiven?
How do you know if you've been touched by God?
The questions weren't posed for debate -
they were quite sincere. How does one know?

One knows having been taught;
one knows having wrestled and prayed;
one knows having faced up,
having encountered ways of life and ways of death,
and having made certain determinations,
having measured experiences, having
seen the light that is God's love, and grace and mercy,
all of which promise life in the face of death.
One knows through what comes of listening
to the voice of God directed to and through
Jesus.

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Temptation - it is often seen as
an experience to be avoided.
But let's put a different twist on this today.
Temptation(s) are necessary to validate
what experiences we have had, and that
need to be processed and interpreted.

Note if you will:
the temptations of Jesus
are conveniently packaged.

What Luke has given us is
a staged reading.

In fact, our every day is filled
with tempting discourse.
If we are awake and alert,
the discourse can't be avoided.
But they can be managed -
with prayer, in community,
knowing that every day, every encounter,
we face moments that reveal the depth
of our character as a Christian people.

What was it that Albert Camus wrote -
(*the Fall*, 1956)?
**"I'll tell you a big secret, my friend:
Don't wait for the Last Judgment.
It happens every day."**

In our Reformed heritage, there lies a teaching:
we are not on our own in life or in death;
we "**belong to Jesus Christ**," our faithful Savior;
there follows a corollary, that
**"all things must be subservient to (the)
salvation"** he affords (see the *Heidelberg
Catechism*, Question No. 1).

Every day is opportunity to see if we are
awake and alert to our belonging.
Are we participants in the love,
the mercy,
the grace,
that brings hope to the world?

Are we here, for good,
as best we can understand
the goodness of Christian gospel?

Are we not here that people might know:
sins are forgiven through
the love of Jesus Christ,
and that we all are
fearfully and wonderfully made,

children of God, and though
we might descend into darkness,
God descends to save and rescue and redeem,
and though
we be in a life that is like a night,
the night is as light to the God we
worship and serve and adore.

Are we not here that we might taste and
see God's goodness and grace, to
experience the love God wants to shower upon
all children of earth?

To the degree that we are not,
we should have sense to pray:
Lord, have mercy on me!
Lord, have mercy on us!

It is a sad commentary
on our culture in general,
and "church" in particular
that we are possessed and preoccupied with
more devil than devotion,
more fear than faith.

We need be awake and alert
to embrace the love that frees us
from the burden of fear,
and the sin of our conceits.

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Another thought about the temptations
that Luke has drawn up for us.

It has been said,
the enemy of the best
is often the good.
Another way to say this:
is good, good enough?
This, I sense, is part of what Jesus
needed to sift out; it was part of his wrestling.

It has been pointed out (Sharon Ringe, *Luke*, p. 60)
that none of the temptations faced by
Jesus are "**inherently harmful or evil.**"

Isn't it curious:
Jesus did not turn stones into bread,
but later on, he fed thousands.

Jesus rejected the offer for
"all the kingdoms of the world"
in exchange for his submission to worship
what was less than God;
yet he possessed a kingdom,
and taught his disciples to pray for its coming.

Jesus may not have thrown himself off a pinnacle
of the temple, a kind of made-for-TV marketing stunt,
but he surely was trusting of God unto his death
on the cross.

One feature of Luke's temptation discourse
is that all the responses Jesus gives - to his
interrogator - are from the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy, you may recall, is
a book devoted to re-telling the law of Moses,
reaffirming the covenant between
God and God's people.

Deuteronomy is a recapitulation of the law
Moses was obliged to record after Israel
spent 40 years in the wilderness.

It is a reminder book.

Deuteronomy was a composition designed to
keep a people loved and liberated by God
faithful to the God who was faithful to them.

Luke is showing us, Jesus will be faithful
to the God who is faithful;
Jesus will not abandon the God whose
teachings define life in the promised land.
Jesus intends to stay awake and alert
so as to be true to God's will.

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Lent - 2016.
Let us be awake and alert.

Let us stay true as we understand the truth,
until all our testing is complete, and we
graduate with honor into the circle of light
where all sinners and saints rest in peace.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*