

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
March 5, 2017

“Believe Out Loud”

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit
into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”
Matthew 4:1

PRELUDE

The theme that will guide us through the
season of Lent this year: “Believe Out Loud.”

In I John we read:

**“... we have known and believe
the love that God has for us.
God is love,
and those who abide in love
abide in God,
and God abides in them ...
as God is, so are we in the world”
(I John 4:16-17).**

Few passages of scripture are so plain;
few so boldly assert:
God is love;
few dare to proclaim:
as God is, so are we in the world.

This we know and believe.
This is what we aspire to
“Believe out loud.”
This is what we will sing, and hope, and pray
through the weeks of Lent this year
as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter.

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The song that will accompany our Lenten journey, "Believe Out Loud," was composed in 2010 by David Lohman. I first encountered the work of David Lohman while worshipping at First Congregational Church, Long Beach, CA, this past January. I did a little research and came across this song. I learned David was a PK, his father a Lutheran pastor, his mother a nurse; for a number of years his musical career has focused on faith and the creating of resources for welcoming, inclusive churches, working to counter the harm done to LGBTQ people in the name of religion.

He has written:

"I have devoted much of my life ... working for a world in which queer kids growing up in the church don't have to experience the kind of pain, isolation, and despair that filled my own adolescent years."

As God is, so are we in the world.

It is God's love,
God's overflowing, unconditional, extravagant love,
always seeking, always working
to overcome our estranged states of being,
wanting to abide with us
for goodness sake,
for our wholeness,
for the integration of our
thoughts, words, deeds,
that we aspire to believe out loud.

The Christian call and challenge:
to practice and demonstrate faith:
to bless as we have been blessed,
to love as we have been loved.

We are an incarnational people.
We embody and disclose in our frail flesh
the wonders of mercy and grace.
As God is, so are we in the world.

The great adventure -
to complete the circuit of God's grace,
to seal the deal, to believe out loud.

What's the song that offers
simple summary of this
wonder and wisdom of the ages?

"They'll know we are Christians
by our love."
As God is, so we pray to be
in the world.

So - through Lent this year - we will
try to plumb the depths of this great gospel.

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In our scripture lesson this morning we
heard Matthew's narration of the
temptations of Jesus.

Jesus, having been freshly baptized,
when the heavens opened to him,
and when Jesus perceived the Spirit,
like a dove, alighting on him to abide with him;
when the still-small Voice thundered:
This is my Child, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased (Psalm 2:7),
is said to have been led by the Spirit
into the wilderness to be tempted.

In the wilderness, Jesus
fasted for 40 days and 40 nights.

Matthew tells us Jesus was “**famished.**”
Depleted. Vulnerable. Intensely so.
Then comes the Tempter, variously identified
as devil, as Satan, an Examiner who gives
voice to options that will determine, in
part, the outcome of Jesus’ life.

“If you are Child of God,
what kind of an adult will you
grow to be?

“If you are Beloved,
how will you believe out loud?

These temptations are contrived,
neatly packaged in gospel lit,
for our benefit and instruction.
They are not telling us what happened
when Jesus’ stomach was growling;
they are telling us how it is when
faith is at work.

The author of this material wants us to know,
our every day is filled with choices
that have consequences,
our every day is a test of who we are
and what we determine to become.

The scene is clearly set.
Jesus is hungry. The question:
Where and how and what will be
the source of his sustenance?
Where will he turn to find
food for his soul?

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Howard Thurman published a collection

of his thoughts under the title:

Deep is the Hunger (1950).

It includes four extended chapters:

We “**share profoundly in the quest and hunger for God**,” Thurman wrote; the dimensions of this hunger were spelled out as yearning for

(1) a sense of history;

(2) a sense of self;

(3) a sense of Presence;

(to discover purpose; “to be alive is to participate responsibly in the experiences of life;” to pause prior to the meal – in gratitude over sustaining and nourishing grace, but also with a **sense of awareness** of what has been yielded in order that one may be sustained for one more day.)

(4) for what Thurman calls a “the Quiet Time,” peace time/contentment time/rest.

In Matthew we find Jesus confronting his own “**deep hunger**” – sorting through how he will fit, how he will maneuver through the powerful tides then sweeping across the face of earth.

It has been pointed out

(in the now dated *Interpreter's Bible*)

that the three temptations roughly parallel existing party lines, group alliance that dominated in Jesus' day;

the Sadducees (these were the prosperity types in the first century; eat, drink, be merrier; be blessed; material as a sign of spiritual favor; take the money and run; turn the stones into bread; why? Why not? You got it, flaunt it.)

the Pharisees (trust and obey, follow the orders, a zeal for making Moses great again; very dedicated - but potentially reckless;

prone to binary thought, you are either in or out;
no shades of gray; certain, without doubt.)
and the Herodians (they brokered their way into
positions of power, they conspired to save
their place whatever the cost to their soul;
powers and principalities of empire; if they
needed bow down and worship at more than
one altar to maintain their place and security,
then they would nod, courteously, kiss whatever
ring was required to preserve the place they treasured.)

Jesus is enticed by the tempter with these
different alignments; Jesus stays true to course.
He will not self-serve his way through life (bread);
he will not showboat, recklessly trust and
blindly believe (“throw yourself down”);
he will not sell himself to elevate himself,
in what is less than himself (“fall down and worship me”).

Deuteronomy 8:3:
“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Deuteronomy 6:16:
“Do not put the Lord your God
to the test.”

Deuteronomy 6:13:
“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only God.”

He ventured his own way - a costly way -
a servant way -
which we would have as our way.

What temptations are ours as we strive to
believe out loud? A strange day is upon us,

and there is temptation to “believe and be done with it.”

- (1) to withdraw; to wash our hands; abdicate our responsibilities; to think: as a Child of God, I have no significance; no role to play in the repair of the world.

In the late 1950's Roger Shinn wrote a little book called *Life, Death and Destiny*. He coined a term I haven't found elsewhere (so I credit Shinn) - “**futilitarian**” - descriptive of a stance that looks upon the landscape of lives with an air of futility. This is a subtle, yet devastating temptation that we need resist.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has
(Margaret Mead (1901-1978)).

Roger Shinn -
“... **Christian testimony says that each day brings opportunities that a faithful boldness may grasp.**”

So - let us not get “**curlish**” in our practice of faith, wrapping ourselves in false futilitarian systems of security. Don't give up, bleak though the landscape may be. Hold on to the vision we cast and hold most dear.

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- (2) Temptation - to fast (to deny oneself, to restrain one's appetite, to sacrifice for the wrong reason; to misconstrue the end game. We serve not to win ... we serve to share for the good of all.

Isaiah 58 - ancient wisdom essential that we heed:

fasting for the nation, fasting for prosperity; fasting for divine favors; yet all the scheming is of no avail.

... loose the bonds of injustice;
... to let the oppressed go free;
to share bread with the hungry,
 to bring homeless into your home;
to see the naked and cover them
 (Isaiah 58:6-8).

Then your light shall break like the dawn,
then healing shall spring us quickly ...
then you shall call and the Lord will answer:
 Here I am.

This temptation right on our doorstep.

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(3) the temptation to enlist God in bully behavior fueled by hate, and greed, and lust of power. As a church of Jesus Christ, we are not pitted against a president or party; we are always contesting with powers and principalities that bring havoc upon the world.

**“There are plenty of good reasons for fighting ...
but no good reason to ever hate without reservation,
to imagine that God Almighty hates with you, too.
Where's evil? It's that large part of every man that
wants to hate without limit, that wants to hate with
God on its side.”**

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

CONCLUSION

Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*:

**“We were created to live our lives in
cooperation with another reality.”**

Jesus, God's beloved, was aware of being bound,
baptized, blessed, and beholden to another Reality.
He shows us the way. He has given us his Word.
He has given a Table. He has left us with promise
to leave us alone. He has given us the challenge
to believe out loud.

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)*