

“Strength Under Pressure”

Luke 4:1-13

Feb.17, 2013

Over the past week, most of you probably either heard, or read about or watched some of the news coverage of the cruise ship Carnival Triumph. It listed and drifted without power until the ship and its over three thousand passengers were finally towed into Mobile, Alabama after a week at sea. Many people arrived back into port with their own horror stories about the whole event. Sewage filling hallways, people fighting over food, hoarding supplies, no electricity or air conditioning. Instead of a luxury cruise, it became an endurance test that measured individual will and nature. It was a test of strength under pressure.

How do you think you would have fared on the Triumph? How would you have stood up? What temptations might you be apt to give in to under such circumstances? Would it be every man and woman for his or her self? We’re only talking about a week. And you do have some limited supplies. So it’s not quite like the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert. But it would still be a wilderness moment. Maybe not a literal desert with tumbleweeds and blowing sand and vultures, but a place nonetheless where we find our mettle tested, our beliefs bludgeoned and our faith filibustered.

The text in Luke tells us that Jesus was led into the desert for forty days. Forty is a good biblical number. Not unlike the rain that lasted forty days and forty nights in the story of Noah or the forty years the God’s people spent wandering the desert. For forty days Jesus was in the desert without food. Forty days being tested and tempted by the devil.

You know when some read this text and they hear that Jesus was being tested by the Devil, they automatically have this image of a guy in red with a pitchfork and horns...apparently he is selling Kraft cheese these days if the latest television commercials are to be believed. But this isn’t the Devil we are meant to have in mind as we read this text. Instead we are really to have in mind the presence of evil. To the biblical writers evil was something taken very seriously. So seriously that the presence of evil was often embodied in the person of Satan or the Devil -a true adversary. A power that weakens our will. Evil is a powerful force in the world

and Jesus knew it. It was so real and so pervasive that he even had to face it in a place like the desert, where he had to face the devil in his basest form with limited resources.

Just think about it. Any source of strength that Jesus may have traditionally relied upon as a boy and as a young man growing up in Nazareth were gone. There was no mom and dad, no brothers or sisters, no bank, no groceries, no fresh change of clothes, no bank account, no friends, no bed, no covers to hide under at night, nothing to hide behind during the daylight, no coffee. Yet perhaps that is when life's temptations and life's pressures are at their greatest? When we find ourselves alone for an extended period of time with our own thoughts and our own frailties. Jesus was no different in this respect.

I don't know about you, but I couldn't even begin to imagine forty days alone. It may sound good at first when you think about it. Ah yes, some time away from it all. No stress, no worries, no cares, just me, myself and I. No phone...no television...no internet...no desk...away from it all. But wait a second! Forty days! What do you mean I have to go forty days without my phone? What do you mean I have to go forty days without television? What do you mean I have to be away from work for forty days? What do you mean I have to be forty days without the internet? How will I survive? How will others survive without me?

For Jesus in the desert that's what his temptations really boil down to, they boil down to the question of survival. The greatest temptation Jesus faces is the temptation to save himself. This is what the Devil says to him time and again in this exchange they have in the wilderness. It's the temptation for Jesus to save himself. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." If you're that hungry Jesus, go ahead, save yourself."

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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.

If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Go ahead Jesus, do it, save yourself is the whisper in Jesus's ear.

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,

for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' Even the devil it seems can quote scripture...but the temptation is the same. Jesus...save yourself. You be the power Jesus. You be strong. Save yourself! That was the greatest pressure and temptation that Jesus faced in the desert. And the text says that, "the devil departed from him until an opportune time."

There were other times when Jesus was tempted. Such as later when the Pharisees came to him and told him to "get out of here for Herod wants to kill you!" Or when his disciple Peter turned to him and said, "But master you cannot be handed over and crucified." The temptation was clear...save yourself Jesus! Even when he was on the cross, he heard the words of the thief hanging next to him saying, "If you're the son of God, save yourself!"

Save yourself! This is also a mantra of the world we live in is it not? That the biggest source of strength that we have is and should be one's self? We have to be strong for ourselves. Unlock the power of you -save yourself!

In fact, if you cannot save yourself then there must be something wrong with you according some so-called experts. If you think of the pressure that people face these days, young, old, male, female...it doesn't matter. For so many the message is that you have everything you need to be your best and to succeed...just believe in yourself...you have everything you need. Is it any wonder that 80% of today's youth believe they are above average? I'm sure that it's not just youth...but a lot of other people feel that way too. We're all told to think of ourselves as better.

It's like the story of the lion who was walking through the jungle one day. The lion thought he thought he was really something. The king of the jungle. The greatest beast of the wild. Stronger than the rest and he wanted to make sure everyone else thought that as well.

The lion grabbed a tiger who was passing by. He growled ferociously and said, "Who's the king of the jungle?" And the tiger, trembling and shaking, said, "You are, o lion. You are the king of the jungle!" Then there was a bear that passed by. And again the lion grabbed him and growled ferociously, and said, "Who's the king of the jungle?" And the bear too said, "You are, o lion. No question about it. You are the king of the jungle!" And then the lion came upon a mighty elephant, huge, massive, towering many feet above the lion! And once more he asked

with a ferocious growl, "Who's the king of the jungle? Who's the greatest beast of the wild?" And the elephant didn't say anything. He just picked up the lion with his trunk, whirled him around several times, and smashed him into a tree. As the lion got up, broken and bruised, he said to the elephant, "Hey, just because you don't know the answer doesn't mean you have to get upset!"

You see the reality is that sooner or later most of us begin to realize that we aren't as strong as we once thought we were. Unlike the lion we don't remain oblivious to the fact that the things we once counted as strengths in our lives no longer are.

What happens when you're not as strong as you thought you were? Or your strength leaves you? Or you find yourself adrift? Where is your strength when you lose your job. Where is your strength when your relationship fails. Or your teenager does something stupid? Or you've been diagnosed with a severe illness? Or you lose your phone? Or the power goes out? Or the money runs out? Or time runs out? What if you struggle with a mental illness or physical disability? We can start to feel the pressure and many will succumb to that pressure and give in to the temptation.

But there are some who will hear the voice that says "save yourself" and they'll hear them as the empty words they really are. They ring hollow and sound like the lie they are.

That's what Jesus knew as he faced the Tempter in the desert. He knew what the Devil was offering him was a lie. Remember as the text tells us, Jesus entered the desert full of the Holy Spirit. He had just been baptized. He had the affirmation of the one he called his Father in Heaven. Jesus knew that the invitation to "save yourself" was a lie. He exposes the truth about the devil.

Jesus lays bare the power of temptation that we all face in this life of ours and the pressure we all encounter when we hear that voice whisper, "save yourself." Even though we had been forty days in the wilderness and even though he was famished, Jesus reveals his ultimate source of strength for us. He reminds us that 'One does not live by bread alone.' That we are to... 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Salvation means trusting God.

And then he reminds even the devil that he is 'not put the Lord your God to the test.' Yet there was the devil...trying to tempt the Son of God anyways... thinking that he could test

Jesus. Thinking that Jesus wouldn't know the difference. But remember he was the one full of the Spirit of God...the one whose strength is strong enough to deal with the pressure. The one who becomes our strength and our salvation by not giving into temptation....but instead goes all the way to the cross and comes out on the other side. That's what makes Jesus the Saviour of the world. He did not seek to save himself...but us. Jesus is the selfless savior and not the selfish Saviour.

Recently, in some reading, I came across a story about how along the rural roads of India, every now and then (as you walk along) you will come to a post about shoulder high with a strong shelf built on top of it. These posts are called "Soma Tonga." People who walk the roads carrying loads on their backs can stop at a Soma Tonga which means resting place. There they place their heavy load on the shelf and rest awhile before continuing on their journey. It is not surprising that new believers in the growing church in India call Christ "My Soma Tonga" -the one who gives me rest, the one who takes on my burdens, the one who renews my strength.

My friends, when we forget that Christ is the strength of the world, or when we are tempted to save ourselves, maybe the time has come in our journey for a rest. May what we do at this table, when we share the cup and the loaf, as we feast on the life of Christ, may these gifts renew and deepen our relationship and our trust in God as we make our journey forward. We will all have our moments in the wilderness, our times of temptation but in Christ we have renewed strength.

It's like the words of Tennyson who once wrote in his poem Ulysses,
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Made weak by time and fate...yes... but we are strong in will, because we have Christ.
 Thanks be to God.