

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships through Love.

Lent I

Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. Jesus said to Satan. Worship. Worship. Worship-that one act of obedience which calls to mind our allegiance to a power higher than ourselves. Jesus had endured forty days and forty nights of fasting and prayer in the wilderness. And right at the moment when he was famished, right at the moment of his vulnerability, when he was set to begin his public ministry, he was presented with the option of choosing to bring the kingdom about in the way of God or the way of the world.

Jesus is tempted by Satan, the tempter, the devil,-that mythical figure which holds real estate in each of us. Just like Jesus, Satan tempts us with the food and goodies of the world, seduces us with the glories of the world and entices us with the power of the world-with the promise that should we choose the way of the world, like Adam and Eve did, should we bow down and worship him, he would give the world to us.

Satan presented the goodies, glories and powers of the world to Jesus, and expected that like Adam and Eve, Jesus would fall for them. But Jesus responds to each temptation with scripture. His final reply to Satan couldn't be clearer and decisive "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"

Jesus' wilderness experience feels like the forty-year journey of the people of Israel in the wilderness. He now represents the new Exodus where he is the one bringing about the restoration of the people of God-where all that had been broken would be restored to its perfection in him.. And his words to Satan "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" becomes a pathway for those who believe in his work of restoration.

Beginning with Adam and Eve, we read about Satan disguising himself as a snake and presented Adam and Eve with the same ambition he had had from the very beginning-to overthrow God and be like God. Satan didn't disclose to Adam and Eve that he himself had wanted to be like God but didn't succeed, he simply says that by eating the fruit you will be like God.

At every moment in our lives, we are also presented with the same words-you will be like God, and we fall for it because deep within us is the ultimate desire to overthrow God and be like God. The idea of overthrowing God in our lives, and to be like God is to become unaccountable, unrestrained, no barriers, no boundaries, no constraints-nothing. The problem with overthrowing God in our lives and to be like God is about being fully in charge of our own lives.

Yes, to sin is to be human, and much as our sins remind us of how human we are, we also see in Jesus, the one who overcomes temptation, our example of how we can overcome temptation of sin and bring about the kingdom in God's way and not man's way.

Here's our dilemma: why do we keep committing the same familiar offences? Why do we keep chasing after the same wrong things? George Herbert's poem 'Sin's Round' begins with these words ***'Sorry, I am, my God, Sorry I am.'*** And then ends with the same words ***'Sorry, I am, my God, Sorry I am.'***

The poem expresses our regret for always choosing the way of the world because that is how we overthrow God and attempt to be like God. Our sense of betrayal is astounding, our jealousy is extreme, our hatred knows no bounds and our inordinate desires kill us.

Here's a story of a monkey who lived on an apple tree beside a river. The tree was full of fruits, and he had food every day. Life was easy. One day, a crocodile came to the riverbank. He was hungry after traveling from a far distance. The monkey gave him some apples. The crocodile liked the apples, and he came back the next day, then the next. Soon the monkey and crocodile became friends. They talked about life, family and problems. The crocodile said to the monkey that he had a wife who lived on the other side of the river. The monkey gave him extra apples to take home.

The crocodile's wife liked the apples, but she did not like the friendship. She became jealous. She thought that if the monkey eats apples every day, his heart must be sweet. She pretended to be very sick and told her husband that the only cure was a monkey's heart. The crocodile was confused. He cared about his friend, but he did not want his wife to die, so he invited the monkey to his home. He said the monkey could ride on his back across the river.

The monkey trusted him and agreed. When they reached the middle of the river, the crocodile stopped swimming, he told the truth, he had to kill the monkey for his wife. The monkey did not panic. He stayed calm and told the crocodile, "I will give you my heart, but I left it in the apple tree, take me back so I can get it." The crocodile believed him and swam back.

As soon as they reached the tree, the monkey climbed up fast, while safe on the branches, the monkey said to the crocodile 'Go tell your wife she married the biggest fool in the world.'

In a profound way, we are all like the crocodile. Much as we care about our relationship with God, we don't care enough to honor that relationship with a heart that is pure, holy and given to service. Our selfish ambition to overthrow God be like God has taken over every aspect of our lives.

This morning, Jesus stands in sharp contrast with Adam, Eve, you and I, and rejects every single offer that Satan presented to him because his desire wasn't to overthrow God nor was it to help Satan achieve his long-held ambition. His desire was to prove to us, that tempted we will be, not once or twice, but repeatedly, with every food, pride and power that the world commands.

But since you cannot be a Christian without any testing, Jesus becomes a model for our own testing and helps us to set our hearts, not only on the worship of the one true God, but that through worship we will bring about the kingdom in God's way.

This is what worship does to us, worship leads us on the path of piety, which is our solemn offering to God. In the wilderness of our lives, worship draws us away from ourselves and into Christ who calls us to be faithful, not to be righteous but faithful.

Worship demystifies us, humbles us and makes us aware that the world has never been about us, isn't about us and will never be about us.

Worship shapes the pattern of our whole existence and invites us to give ourselves wholly to God in just the same way that Christ has given himself for us.

Worship is the only means by which we resist anything that draws us away from God. To bow before God in worship keeps us from bowing before anyone and anything else in the world. Our worship makes clear who it is that commands our allegiance-and it is not the powers that be.

Because the powers that be have corrupted themselves to the point where there is no bottom, no shame. We keep sinking lower and lower because our sense of morality is lost. We continually choose the kingdom of the world because it is not only convenient, but it helps us to be like God and unaccountable.

The moral decay in our society is such that we are willing to sacrifice the little reputation that we have on the altar of political expediency. We have lost the zest to be authentic because we don't worship. Worship is like a mirror-we see at first hand, the façade we have created.

I heard about these two brothers who were 4 and 6 years old who were spending the night at their grandmother's house. She told them before they went to bed to make sure they say their prayers. They went to their bedroom and got on their knees. The youngest brother started praying at the top of his lungs, Lord I pray for a new bicycle. I pray for a PlayStation., I pray for a keyboard. His older brother stopped and asked 'why are you screaming? God is not deaf? He said 'I know that but grandma is'

One of the blessings of Lent is that our worship creates a space for us to question whether our lives are in sync with what we pray for, whether the choices we make affirm the character of our worship or whether we are willing to allow our worship to transform us into the likeness of Christ.

One day a spiritual teacher asked his disciples why God made human. One of them answered "That, teacher, is easy. So we can pray." After a brief silence, the teacher asked another question: "Why, then, did God make angels?" the same young man tried again, "Perhaps so that they also could pray." The teacher looked at him and smiled. "The angels," He said, "are perfectly capable of offering prayer to God, but only humans can do what they are uniquely created to do." "What is that?" the disciple asked. "What God wants from humans and what only humans can do is to become fully human." To be fully human, is to be authentic-and it is worship which leads us on that part toward authenticity.

And so, this Lent, our task is to be fully human. If you want to give up something, don't give up chocolate, milk, meat, fried chicken, crab cake or crème brûlée-those are easy and do not compel anything in you. Rather, give up the lies, dishonesty, hypocrisy, betrayal, greed, bigotry, racism, jealousy, indifference and hatred-these are the ways of the world. Take Jesus as a model and follow him, at whatever cost. There you will find in worship the authentic self you have been looking for.

Amen.