

The Message for Sunday, February 21, 2010

Title: “Ambushed”

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

I. Ambushed... Did you ever feel ambushed? An ambush is a maneuver in which an aggressor hides in wait in a concealed location so that he or she can jump on an unsuspecting victim. It not only takes the victim by surprise; it also allows the aggressor the opportunity to wait and conserve energy.

I grew up watching the bad guys ambush the good guys in the movies on Saturday morning. The bad guys—always wearing black hats—would wait in the gulch and come riding out on an unsuspecting posse—all wearing white hats.

One of the most famous ambushes in all of history happened when Jesus was just a small boy—perhaps about the same time he got lost in the Temple in Jerusalem. The ambush happened thousands of miles away in Germany at the Teutoburg Forest (in 9 A. D.). The Germanic armies lay in wait and completely destroyed three Roman Legions. Their defeat was so complete that the Romans drew the boundary of their Empire at the Rhine River. That boundary lasted for the next 400 years, until the Roman Empire began to crumble in the West. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambush>)

Sometimes, we feel ambushed by situations in life that sneak up on us and threaten us. Unless you are in the military or law enforcement, it is likely that there is no physical warfare in your daily ambushes. However, most of us have felt ambushed. What about the business meeting where a couple of colleagues got together and ganged up on you and your idea? What about the election in a club where you thought you could count on the votes of your friends—only to discover that they had decided to go together and vote against you?

II. xxxxx... Sometimes, I think we assume temptation works the same way: I.e., I believe many people think that temptation lies out there in total concealment and waits to jump us when our guard is down. At first glance, the Gospel might give this impression. Luke tells us that Jesus had just come in from spending forty days in the Wilderness, where he had nothing to eat.

When I was a child, I imagined this Wilderness to be like the woods in North Alabama. We used to go out to the woods on a Saturday afternoon and have a picnic, or collect colorful leaves beside a burbling brook. The woods were thick and dark. However, when I went to Israel, I saw, for the first time what wilderness really meant. For as far as the eye can see, there is nothing but taupe-colored dirt and rock. It is almost like a gravel pit with patches of very fine dirt—almost like heaps of dust. The only vegetation is an occasional bush that looks like sagebrush.

Luke does not tell us where in the Wilderness Jesus had been. It could have been anywhere from Khirbet Qumran to Engedi—two obvious places where water might have been available. When Jesus came in from the Wilderness, he was undoubtedly weak and famished.

Why, I remember hiking about three kilometers up a mountain to the ancient town of Nyssa when I was last in Turkey. (One of the best-preserved of the ancient libraries is there.) It was a hot July day. The ancient ruins afforded some shade from the sun, but only when staying in one place. There was no shade or place to sit the entire time I was walking up or back down. When I got back, I rode an un-air-conditioned mini-bus to the nearest regular bus station. There I got on a larger bus that was scarcely air-conditioned. Most of the people on the bus were as unbathed as I. The clothes that I wore were permanently scarred by perspiration and dust. When I finally got back to my hotel, I ordered a Turkish *döner* (a typical Turkish sandwich) and headed to my room where I nearly collapsed.

That was *one* day. I can not imagine what it would have been like to do that for forty days. I was at the weakest I had been or expect to be in years. Had the devil jumped me, it would have been a real struggle to ward him off. Jesus was forty times worse off when the devil suggested that Jesus turn stone into bread. When the devil could not appeal to Jesus' hollow stomach, he offered him power, unimagined power. Realizing that this did not work, the devil tempted Jesus with a temptation that would prove fatal to most people: He tempted Jesus with scripture and asked him to tempt God to see if he really would protect his son. Of course, Jesus resisted each of these very unfair and powerful temptations.

Not only does the average reader come away from that moving story of the Temptation with an appreciation of the power of suggestion; the average reader comes away with a new appreciation for the tactics of the devil. The devil uses what he thinks are our greatest weaknesses in order to trip us up. But, there is something the average reader will overlook. And it is the fact that the devil did not wait in concealment for Jesus.

Luke very carefully says that Jesus was led into the Wilderness by the Spirit, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. The devil did not attempt to ambush Jesus. The devil had been with Jesus and had been tempting Jesus the whole time. Luke only tells us about the last three temptations! When it was all over, Luke simply says that the devil left him until a more opportune time.

Now, from that story, I want to draw these conclusions.

III. First... First, there is this. Temptations seldom lie in wait to ambush us. They linger. They are around us all of the time. And, they are no secret to us. If we are of an average mind, we know what our weaknesses are. Either that, or we discover pretty soon what we need to avoid.

The consequences of temptation are what I call "tuition:" the tuition paid for learning one of life's lessons. It would seem to me that the more expensive the "tuition," the greater likelihood we have of learning life's lesson. But, that is not necessarily the case because of one thing: And, that one thing is self-deception. It is we who try to deceive ourselves into thinking that temptations are not temptations.

My first conclusion, then, is this: That temptations do not really lie in ambush. They do not creep up on us. We live with them all of the time. They only become problems when we choose to think that we can handle them without Christ.

IV. Second... The second conclusion I want to draw is this. Our temptations are not necessarily temptations for everyone else. Let's say that it is Sunday morning; it is dark and rainy; maybe you stayed up too late the night before. For some people, the temptation will be to stay in bed, maybe catch the service on the radio, and make a promise to go to church next week.

For others, worship is not an option. As I have said before, when I was growing up, "blood" or "death" had to be in the first sentence of the excuse for missing Church almost anytime. There was no temptation known to humanity that would have kept the O'Bannon Family from their appointed pew.

Or, consider the temptations to miss your workout at the gym. I seem to find more than the average person. For others, they live to work out.

Or, let's consider something as ubiquitous as the internet. Perhaps I have gone now to meddling. If you have e-mail, you are a rare person who does not have a friend whose "sensitivities" are different from yours. Without opening some e-mail, we know from the "RE" or comment line, that it is going to be something we would be better off NOT seeing. What do we do? Do we open it with our mouse covering the little "x" that deletes, thinking we will take a chance and delete once we have seen too much? Or, do we simply delete without opening it? Some people have no problem simply deleting, while others have to stew about it for a while—and then will possibly open it.

'Just one more. If I were forced to guess, my professional opinion is that the most common and pestering temptation is—are you ready for it?—impatience. Almost all of us are impatient about something. It is not the same thing for each of us, but we all have something that pushes our patience.

I think that impatience causes more people to err than almost any other common, ordinary temptation. Impatience is often the only ingredient that will spoil a casserole. Impatience is the cause of most traffic violations, including getting your picture taken by one of the cameras all over town. Road rage is caused by the temptation of impatience. Ignoring your child, or your spouse, or your elderly parent is caused by impatience.

The second conclusion I draw is that while everybody has temptations, what might tempt me possibly would not tempt you. And yet, none of us would be able to handle even the most elementary temptation without Christ.

V. Third... The third conclusion I want to draw is this. *Circuit Rider* is a quarterly periodical for United Methodist Clergy. You might want to see the most recent issue, because there is an article by our own, Jacob Armstrong. But, there is also another article. It is entitled, "Why I Don't Go to Church." (Erin Stanley, "Why I Don't Go to Church," *Circuit Rider*, Feb/Mar/Apr 2010, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 16-17.)

In that article the author says, "I cannot embrace this seemingly ultimatum-based faith, and I see Christianity's rules for attaining eternal life among the most arrogant of religions I have learned about." (p. 16)

The purpose of the article is to make us realize that for many in the 21st Century, religion is about as passé as a side saddle for hogs. The temptation facing many Christians today is to buckle under this kind of cultural dismissal of Christianity and the Church. That temptation is one of the greatest facing a church that lives in the

wilderness of the cultural landscape today. The temptation is simply to say, “Well, that’s their opinion, and they are entitled to it.” The temptation is to ignore the fact that there are now probably a majority of people who see the church as somewhat passé. The temptation is simply to withdraw into our own circles and hold on for better times.

Friends, there will not be any better times if we yield to the temptation of living our lives as though the Gospel of Jesus Christ was irrelevant.

The third conclusion I want to draw is that this culture needs to see the power of victorious Christian faith, flourishing in a skeptical 21st century. And that is totally within the potential and the power of this congregation.

VI. A last word... Temptations seldom ambush us. We live with temptations everyday. But, if there is any one temptation we must resist, then let it be the self-deceptive temptation that the irreligious forces within any community are not enough to cause us any worry. There is only one way of handling that temptation. And that is with Christ. Amen.

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