

“Not on Bread Alone”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 3/10/19

Luke 4:1-4: *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted^(a) by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.*

³*The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”*

⁴*Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”*

My hope is that during this start to the season of Lent, the 40 days in which we either give up something or add something that helps our spiritual endeavors, that we can look at the classic story of Jesus facing 3 temptations, that we might journey together as to their significance for our own lives. Starting this Sunday, and then for the following two, I plan to unpack each temptation a bit—and see where we land together on its relevance to us, today, in our own personal journeys.

As some of you already may know, Ruth’s and my wedding anniversary was yesterday. God has blessed me richly; overall, I cannot complain even a little bit, but God taking away an hour for Daylight Savings Time last night is a funny way of congratulating us. Ruth and I both experienced a great deal of poverty when we were growing up as children, and we often get into a bit of “one-upmanship” with one another, where we try to out-do the other with heart-wrenching (yet often comical) stories of poverty. Like she’d bemoan eating eggs and beans nearly daily while growing up, and I’d say something like “we’d eat beans on Wednesday if we were lucky.” Or I’d say, “one time we inherited a large sack of potatoes and that was all we ate for a whole month,” and she’d respond, “Lucky you. We only had potatoes twice a year.” Another time she asked me, “Did you ever get to eat out?” I said, “Yes, there were a couple times a year that we ate at McDonalds.” She was quick to say, “McDonalds? Lucky! I would fish out the Happy Meal toys from my neighbors’ trash.” Back and forth we would go, comparing stories and joking about it—maybe exaggerating a little bit, but unfortunately not that much. One thing we decided when got married 23 years ago, literally on the first night of our honeymoon, was that we would always buy “the good cereal,” not the generic knock-offs. If we wanted Lucky Charms, we would actually buy “Lucky Charms,” not “Marshmallow Magic”; “Trix,” not “Pranks”; “Apple Jacks” instead of “Apple Orbits”; “Cap’n Crunch” instead of “Crisp Crunch.” It was something small, almost silly, but for us it was our first “adult” decision together. However, we’ve grown so much since then. Which cereal we buy has become less and less reliant on name, but instead more on substance, convenience, and price.

Life changes us, doesn’t it? As we grow, our tastes change. When I was a kid, I hated onions. Now, I don’t mind them so much. In our evolution of priorities, our metamorphosis of becoming better humans, certainly we must look at Jesus’ entering into a 40day fast with a bit of wonder. What do Jesus’ struggles mean for my own struggles. In the passage in Luke, we read: *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the*

devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

Jesus, in his defense against the Devil, quotes from this passage in Deuteronomy 8: *"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* We can assume from Jesus' own reference in this story, that Jesus is talking about something more powerful than simple food, or basic physical sustenance. The passage confirms something much deeper when it says instead of food alone, but that we feed "on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

We have another famous story in the Jesus narrative to corroborate this developing principle. In John 4, we can read about the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, where Jesus spends most of day talking with her. When his disciples returned with food that they had bought because they were all so hungry, they urged him to eat. They said, "Rabbi, eat something." But he responded with, "I have food you know not of." Interestingly, the narrator points out that the disciples thought that he had perhaps already eaten, and instead, just like in the desert, he had been referring to this yet deeper, more meaningful "food" that comes from God. Don't you want even a little piece of the food Jesus was talking about?

Our church doesn't believe in dogma of doctrine. It doesn't have a creed that we must all agree to in order to be considered part of this faith community. However, it does believe in core disciplines, or spiritual practices. And one of those spiritual disciplines is to dedicate time (whether it be 10 minutes or an hour) to both daily prayer and study. This task of daily "study" infers a sort of consumption and meditation on edifying, spiritual texts or words—whether scripture or other sacred writings or lessons, or wisdom literatures and discussions of such. It is our belief, based on the principle that Jesus underlines in his own teachings, that we must listen to God's voice—and it is speaking all around us. The Apostle Paul even confesses that God manifests in nature itself, so we conclude that we must not ignore it. We must look around and run towards wisdom, i.e. "the words of God," rather than hide from it. So, pick up a book, open your Bible, listen to a podcast or Youtube lecture—let words of wisdom find their way to your heart. You will not survive on "bread alone" in this world, not if you want to truly live.

In our denomination, the United Church of the Christ, our mantra is and has been for some years now, "God is still speaking." We believe God's words are not merely canonized and locked into any single body of literature, never to be heard from again. We believe God is speaking to us everywhere we turn, everyday, and those words must not be ignored. Listen to God's Spirit as the words of life pour over you. Jesus said, "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you." However, it is first our job first to seek. First we must knock. And a daily dive into encouraging words of wisdom, grounded sayings of enlightenment, wisdoms that illuminate and challenge us is a place to start. Jesus understood that simply eating to sustain life has its merit if mere survival is the goal, but Jesus also seemed quite astute

to point out that if you truly want to “live” in this life—then more is required. “Thou shall not live on bread alone,” is a personal challenge for each of us to seek out God’s voice in both the dark and the light. God is feeding us, but will we eat. There are large bins of spiritual edibles at every turn, but are we too afraid to even smell and taste for fear that we may eat the wrong thing? That we may consume something that is in itself a temptation of distraction? My advice is a simple, like the psalmist said nearly three millennia ago (Psalm 34:8): “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the person who takes refuge in the Lord!” So, I say you cannot eat that which you do not taste. “Taste and see.” That is my counsel. And do not be afraid of learning new things. God will open your heart and mind, and show you what words are the Lord’s. Just don’t be afraid of where you may hear them, or from whom. God is everywhere and in everyone. That’s why we must respect each other, and each other’s individual journeys. But how can we grow if we never listen, and how can we hear if we never encounter a voice other than our own.

As we enter into our time of Lent, 40 days before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, we typically mark this period with ashes (humility/learning). If you were unable to receive the ashes this past Wednesday and wish to participate, I will be around to dispense ashes after service. Just let me know.

Shalom/Peace