

Sermon Title: “God Will Show Us Salvation”

Text: Luke 4:1-13

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As many of you know, last week Brian Froese from CMU was here delivering a series of lectures about the book of Revelation. At various points throughout the weekend, he talked about and the church’s historical fascination with “end times” theology—trying to figure out when and why and how, wondering if events in our day and age are “signs” that the end is nigh, etc.

Yesterday morning, I came across the following tongue-in-cheek piece at a blog called “The Internet Monk” that brought me back to last weekend ☺.

It has been quite a week....

- A Roman Catholic Pope resigns for the first time in over 600 years.
- G20 global finance leaders gather in Moscow (and a meteor explodes in Russian skies — coincidence?)
- Another person in Great Britain has contracted a potentially fatal SARS-like virus which the World Health Organization says was unknown in humans until a few months ago..
- Rob Bell [a lightning rod for criticism in some parts of the Christian world] released a video trailer and tour dates for his new book. Also, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science announced a new movie titled “*The Unbelievers*” that will premiere in 2013.
- North Korea defiantly conducted their latest nuclear test just hours before President Obama’s State of the Union address.
- In a “cosmic coincidence,” a meteor entered the earth’s atmosphere, exploding near the Ural Mountain city of Chelyabinsk in Russia, injuring over a thousand people at the same time an asteroid came close to the earth.
- As the U.S. government faces a huge deadline regarding sequestration budget cuts, President Obama is making ready to visit the Middle East in March.¹

Make of these signs what you will... or won’t.

Well, we move from lofty speculations about the end of the world to more humble ones... and, I think, more relevant and useful ones ☺.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent—the season of the Christian year where we focus on repentance, prayer, and self-denial in preparation for the events of Holy Week.

¹ <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/hmm-signs-of-the-times>

Our theme this year is “Ashamed No More.” Over the course of the next month and a half or so, our worship together will be looking at the theme of **shame** and how the person and work of Jesus addresses this as we journey through Lent toward Easter.

There will be a few Sundays where we will have guests delivering the sermon and their topics will not follow this theme precisely, but this is the general theme we will be orienting our worship services according to from now until Easter.

For each Sunday there will be a visual projected on the wall. These visuals were created by Val Wiebe from Mennonite Church Saskatchewan. Sometimes they will be easily “interpretable” and will connect obviously with the worship theme... sometimes they may not. But hopefully they will give us images to anchor our reflections during this Lenten season.

The text that I have chosen to focus on this morning does not, at first glance, seem to obviously address the theme of shame.

As we have just heard, this is the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

Let’s first look at the text itself and then see if or how it might help us as we think about shame.

Let’s set the scene. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan river as a public identification as God’s beloved son, and as a form of identification with human beings.

Jesus is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. There, for forty days, he eats nothing and is tempted by the devil. At the end of these forty days, the devil offers Jesus three famous temptations.

1. Turn these stones into bread!
2. Bow down and worship me and I will give you authority over all the earth!
3. Throw yourself down from the temple and demonstrate that you are the son of God

Jesus resists all three temptations and returns, filled with the power of the Spirit, to Galilee to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

So far, so good. It’s a well-known story.

But as is so often the case, there is a lot going on underneath the surface in this passage. The first hearers/readers of this story would have heard all kinds of echoes from earlier parts of the biblical narrative.

To begin with, this is not the first time we have heard of the devil whispering in the ears of God’s children... Way back in Genesis, we remember, the serpent saying to Adam and

Eve... “Go on, choose your own way... It’s OK... God can’t be trusted... He doesn’t want your eyes to be opened so that you will see good and evil as he does...

And, of course we know how the story ends—with Adam and Eve *yielding* to temptation and being exiled from Eden in bitterness and shame.

Secondly, the theme of “wilderness” would have been a very familiar one for the first hearers of this story.

They would have instantly made the connection between Jesus’ forty *days* in the wilderness and Israel’s forty *years* in the wilderness, Moses’ forty days on the mountain, etc.

For Israel, the wilderness in between Egypt and Canaan was a time of testing, a time when they frequently stumbled and failed, grumbling against the Lord (for lack of bread!), fashioning idols, and failing to trust in the future God was preparing for them.

If this connection between Jesus’ temptation and the story of Israel were not obvious enough, Jesus’ usage of the Hebrew Scriptures would have driven the point home.

In each of the three temptations, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy—the book of the OT where Israel’s story is most comprehensively summarized and explained, where they are standing on the plains of Moab, ready to enter Canaan, and Moses delivers a series of speeches recounting their entire history of liberation from Egypt and subsequent wandering in the desert.

The two-fold point would have been clear enough.

Jesus was faithful where Adam was not, resisting the temptations of the devil where the first humans had given in (a point Paul brings this out more fully in Romans 5).

Jesus was faithful where Israel was not, persevering through the harshness, the loneliness, and the struggle of the wilderness without giving into grumbling and idolatry.

Jesus is re-presenting the story from creation and fall to Israel and exile—in a sense, undoing the tragedy of human sin and folly. And, as the new Adam, the new Israel, the truest expression of what humanity was meant to *be* and to *do*, he is redeeming and reclaiming all of the human story and launching it into a new way forward.

This text is not a story about an individual heroically resisting temptation and a call for us to go and do likewise, even if that is how it is sometimes presented, and even if we can, obviously, learn from Jesus about how to resist temptation.

Before *any* of that, this passage is a statement about who Jesus is and about the scope of what God *is* doing and *will* do in and through him.

So. What does any of this have to do with shame?

While there may not be explicit connections between our text today and shame, I think there are connections that can be made.

We may not be tempted in the same way that Jesus was, but we, too, are familiar with temptation. We, too, are familiar with the “wilderness,” if on a metaphorical rather than a literal level.

As it was for Israel as it perhaps even was for Jesus, the wilderness is where God seems absent, where answers are not obvious, where the ground is rough and dry and where life is difficult to navigate.

The wilderness could be a time of suffering or prolonged doubt.

It could be a long stretch of monotonous tedium where life seems dull and devoid of colour or meaning.

And it could be a time of testing, of temptation... A time when the enemy of God, the enemy of humanity, the “accuser” (which is what the word *satan* means in Hebrew) is “on the prowl,” as 1 Peter 5:8 puts it, seeking to devour and destroy God’s people and God’s plans for goodness and wholeness.

It seems to me that there are two main areas in which the devil does his work, throughout the biblical narrative and in our own lives:

1. We are better than we think we are—the devil appeals to our pride, to our desire to be more than we were made to be, to *be like God*, autonomous, free, unshackled...
2. We are worse than we think we are—the devil appeals to our shame, attempting to convince us that we are worthless, that we are failures, that we are unlovable, that we have made too many mistakes, that God is displeased with us, and that things are never going to change.

We are gods. Or we are worms.

In our text today, Jesus was tempted mainly in the first way—he was tempted to misuse his divinity for personal gain, tempted to grasp after power and authority in improper ways.

I suspect that for many of us, the second mode of the tempter is more familiar. We are well acquainted with shame.

Many of you are familiar with TED Talks—short lectures on various subjects on a popular web channel. A while back a social scientist named Brene Brown delivered a talk on her findings about shame and vulnerability. She mused later that she thought she

might get 500-1000 views. At last count this week, her talk on moving past the crippling effects of shame was well over 7 million views.

I think that all of us carry some degree of shame around with us. We know about the dark corners of our lives that nobody sees. We know about our failures, our habitual sins, our perceived inadequacies and frustrations.

We look at the failed marriage, the fractured relationship with kids, the missed job opportunity, the indifference to suffering, the temptations we yield to, the dark feelings we sometimes nourish in our hearts, the... *whatever...* and we think, “*How could God possibly love me or have any use for me?*”

In the wilderness, you and I are not tempted to turn stones into bread or to hurl ourselves from tall buildings, nor are we offered sovereignty over the nations.

But we are presented with other lies about God and about ourselves that can be tempting to embrace.

Whether it is in tempting us to think of ourselves as gods or as worms, both are effective ways of diverting us from a life of fruitful obedience, both are effective ways of preventing us from living with a healthy understanding of who we are and how we are to orient ourselves in relation to God.

So what do we do in the wilderness? What would God have us learn? How would God have us emerge from these seasons of crisis and testing and trial?

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama has written a book called *Three Mile an Hour God*. Here’s what he has to say about “the wilderness”:

Wilderness, then, is the place where we are face to face with danger and promise. And that is an educational situation for the people of God. When danger and promise come together for us, it is called crisis. The Bible does not simply speak of danger. If it did so, the biblical faith would be reduced to a “protection-from-danger-religion.” The Bible does not simply speak about promise. If it did so, the biblical faith would be reduced to a “happy-ending-religion.” The Bible speaks about a crisis situation, coexistence of danger and promise—wilderness—and there God teaches man. In the wilderness we are called to go beyond “protection-from-danger-religion” and “happy-ending-religion.” There we are called to “trust” in God.²

The wilderness is the place where a deep trust can emerge. Trust that goes beyond happy endings, beyond pleasant circumstances, beyond protection, beyond what we can get from God. Trust that clings to God for his own sake.

² Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980), 4.

In the wilderness, we can learn that God can be trusted with our lives, with our futures, with our hopes and dreams and failures and doubts. And that God can lead us out of the shame that cripples us and limits our effectiveness in God's kingdom.

There are many different ways of dealing with shame, according to the experts. Many involve looking deep into our pasts and into our souls, uncovering and exposing the dark and hurtful parts, being vulnerable and empathetic, reaching out towards other people.

All of these are good and very useful.

But at the deepest level, our shame is not dealt with via techniques or self-improvement methods.

Our shame is, finally, only covered by the person and work of God in Christ Jesus.

We are given an accurate picture of both God and ourselves.

In Christ, we see that God has gone to great lengths to set us free from the sin and the shame that enslave us.

In Christ, we see what God truly thinks of us. We are neither gods nor worms, but cracked bearers of God's image that are being put back together by our Creator.

In Christ we are reminded that salvation is always a gift, not an accomplishment, not something we can ever earn or achieve for ourselves.

I want to close with a few verses from some of the other texts from this week's lectionary readings that highlight this.

Deuteronomy 26:8-9: The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey (as we see in the image on the wall).

Psalm 91:14-16: Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Romans 10:11-13: The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

May we follow this God with confidence. May we call on this God's name often. May we trust that this is the God who will get us through the wilderness and into the future he has prepared for his people.

Amen.