

“The Calling”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

The liturgical season of Lent raises awareness of sin in our lives as well as society and culture. Followers of Jesus must balance our awareness of sin with our awareness of God who is loving, compassionate, and forgiving. This balancing of the two is difficult because it beckons us to trust God or our rationalization that sin is no big deal. When we do the latter, we minimize our need for God’s help. When we do the former, we conform to our selfish desires for what we want when we want it, thus, letting go of conforming to the living Word (Jesus) and the written Word (the Bible). The good news of the gospel shifts us away from the disturbance caused by the sin of selfishness and gives us the courageous calling to focus our attention on dealing with our sin head on with trust and reliance on God’s help. Oswald Chambers writes, “...persist in the disturbance until [we] get face to face with the Lord himself.”¹

Janet and I have been supporting Plant with Purpose, a ministry committed to the reforestation of the Dominican Republic, for the past thirty-five years. Another problem in the Dominican Republic is the high mortality rate of children. Hundreds of children die everyday due to malnutrition. Scott Sabin, the Executive Director of Plant with Purpose, originally founded as Floresta, tells this story about a friend of his on a recent trip to the Dominican Republic:

¹Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Westwood, New Jersey: Barbour and Company Inc, by permission from Dodd Mead & Company, Inc, 1935), 42.

She visited a slum and in a small, dirty cardboard and aluminum shack, she met a girl her own age, with a tiny baby. After an initial introduction, through an interpreter, the girl began to talk excitedly and begged my friend to take her baby. "Please," she said. "He is so small you could fit him in your purse, and no one would ever know. You could take him and give him a better life." My friend, of course, said no. The young girl began to sob. "If he stays here, he will die. There is no hope for him here."

Scott's retelling of this story is about redemption. Yes, redemption from a death sentence.

The temptation was to smuggle the boy out of the Dominican Republic illegally. This story prompted Plant for Purpose to develop a ministry of legal adoptions, for babies like the one described in the story, to be redeemed from certain death. You see, God redeems us in real life situations as well as for eternal life.

Temptation. Temptation is the tool the devil used against Jesus and uses against us to motivate us to conform to society and culture's definitions of moral and ethical...right and wrong. Temptation is the enticement to go against the teachings of the Word of God, living (Jesus) and written (the Bible). Whether it is the temptation to gossip or smuggle a baby out of the Dominican Republic, the enticements to sin are many.

Temptation is real my friends. And all four Scripture readings today guide us with good counsel. The Deuteronomist in Deuteronomy 26 challenges us to confess that God's faithfulness is the basis of life. The psalmist in Psalm 91 reminds us to rest in God's faithfulness, despite the circumstances we face. In that place, we'll know our greatest safety, security, and refuge. Paul, in his letter to the Roman Christians, tells us to call on the Lord, always, and in all ways. This way we will be redeemed now and forever.

And Luke, in Luke 4, gives us great help in seeing how Jesus, in his humanity, faced the same temptations we do. Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights. The devil came to Jesus three times with temptation. The first temptation came in the form of making Jesus think he would only be able to survive by the sustenance of bread as opposed to the Father's faithfulness. The second temptation bated Jesus to violate the first commandment by replacing the Father with the devil for his loyalty and affection. Finally, the third temptation asked Jesus to manipulate the Father and to use his power in a self-serving way. Jesus has lived our lives in that he has experienced our temptations and not conformed to their enticement.²

Life is an ongoing series of choices. Your choices matter. The fulfillment of God's plans for humanity requires our cooperation with God. Anytime we are enticed to sin, we are tempted to test God's faithfulness. Listen to the words of Anne Lamott regarding temptation. Anne writes,

I was scared much of the time. Life was utterly schizophrenic. I was loved and often seemed cheerful, but fear pulsed inside me. I was broke, clearly a drunk, and also bulimic. I was cracking up. But a feather of truth floated inside the door of my mind-the truth that I was crossing over to the dark side.³

Temptation is the mechanism used by God to guide us into obedience and true freedom.

Anne was tempted with sexual infidelity, cocaine, alcohol, and religious syncretism. She gave in and was confused until she gave it all up and accepted Jesus Christ into her life. The pressures and temptations to return to her old manner of living

²I am grateful for the thinking and writing of Carolyn J. Sharp, William Greenway, J. Clinton McCann Jr., Barbara K. Lundblad, Anna B. Olson, Shively T. J. Smith, and James C. Howell in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, editors, *Connections, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 24-26, 26-28, 29-30, 31-32, 33-34, 35-37, and 37-39.

³Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 39-41.

were ongoing and many. When we believe that a particular temptation is possible to overcome in our own strength, then it cannot be a real temptation. However, when we believe the temptation is impossible to overcome in our own strength, then the only thing we can do is to ask God to do it for us. Jesus has already overcome every temptation we encounter.

The calling we have as Christians is to embrace and be embraced by the good news, the Gospel, and redemption. And we are to do this fearlessly and beyond imposed boundaries. Again, Oswald Chambers writes about our calling and redemption, “Our calling is not primarily to be holy men and women, but to be proclaimers of the gospel of God. The one all-important thing is that the gospel of God should be recognized as the abiding reality. Reality is not human goodness, or holiness, or heaven, or hell— it is redemption.”⁴ God’s peace, joy, and love is ours. God’s grace and forgiveness is ours. God’s mercy is ours. All of whom God is, is for us, not against us. You have been chosen. You have been called. You are the very presence of God in a hurting world for the redemption of someone, somewhere, at some time. And this can happen on a regular basis. This describes loving God, loving others, and making disciples. Amen.

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⁴Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, 21.