

A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, July 20, 2008

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“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God *is* faithful, who will not [allow] you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear *it*” (from the epistle, 1 Corinthians 10:1).

In a narcissistic world that lacks historical perspective, this statement from 1 Corinthians can come as a bit of a shock. You mean to say that my suffering, challenges and temptations are not unique? You mean to say that others before me have been tested in the very same way that I am being tested? You mean to say that I can learn from them?

St. Paul begins our epistle with the words, “Brethren, I would not have you to be ignorant.” It is another way of saying, “People, don’t be stupid!” About what? About the whole biblical experience of Israel and what it teaches us. The Bible is a story about how others before us have been tempted, have responded to that temptation by being faithful or faithless, and have experienced God’s blessing or judgment, respectively, as a result. We should know and learn from this.

The epistle is about how we should respond to God’s grace. Some in the church in Corinth were what we would call “presumptuous.” They reasoned that because they had received God’s grace in baptism, and because they fed on the heavenly food of Christ’s body and blood, they were free to do what they wanted and ignore the demands of love.

St. Paul says, “You should know that the people of Israel felt that same way, and you should know what happened to them.” They experienced a sort of baptism in the Red Sea. The Holy Spirit led them by day and by night. They fed on spiritual food—the manna from heaven. But they presumed to disobey God and all but two of them died in the wilderness and did not enter the Promised Land.

There is a long history of examples to draw upon as we make decisions in the spiritual life, but too often we act as though we are the first to ever be tested. For example, our culture acts as though we are the first generation to discover sex, seemingly unaware that all the same themes are present in the three thousand year old stories of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, David and Bathsheba and Amnon and Tamar, to name just a few.

Of course, to know the biblical stories, we must read them. This is why we encourage people to read the Bible each day according to the Prayer Book lectionary for daily reading. Daily Bible reading helps us to see how the central themes of the biblical story connect to our lives. Daily Bible reading helps us to be regularly encouraged by the faithfulness of those who have obeyed God and warned by the disobedience of those who have not.

In the Morning Prayer lectionary from the Prayer Book, we are currently reading about Saul and why God first chose and then rejected him as king. We are reading about how and why God chose David to be king instead. Saul’s main fault was that he followed popular opinion rather than doing what God said to do. He feared the people more than God. And when he did not do what God asked, he never came to a sincere repentance. Instead, he always tried to justify the wrong he had done.

King David loved God and trusted God and didn't care what other people thought. To be sure, David had his serious flaws. He committed adultery and murder and experienced significant consequences in his life as a result. But, whereas Saul continued to be unfaithful, David acknowledged his sin, made a good confession and was forgiven and restored.

The story of David has similarities with the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son experienced exile in a far country after he left his father's house. David, as a consequence of his sin, was driven out of Jerusalem into a state of exile by his son, Absalom. As the Prodigal Son returned to joy and partying, so King David returned to Jerusalem and was again acknowledged as king.

This theme of exile and return is central to gospel. The gospel tells how people who have not done what God wants can change and begin to live in new ways. God's judgment comes on sin. But God forgives us and restores us when we return and repent.

This is our story for we, like David and the Prodigal Son, have not always done what God wants. That's why we are here. Through the liturgy we return again to God. We are reconciled to God through the cross so that we can begin to live in a new way, and experience the peace and the joy that comes only from God.

The biblical story of exile and return competes with other stories that would define our lives. We are told that humanity is all about economics, and that our well-being is determined entirely by Dow Jones and net worth. We are told that humanity is all about pleasure, and that our well-being is all about doing what we want to do, regardless of the moral law.

The Bible teaches us what happens to those who believe and live out the competing stories. They fall in the wilderness and are not able to enter the Promised Land. They find out that their money will neither save them nor bring them peace. This is why we need, as the Advent 2 collect says, to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Scriptures, so that we may "embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life" (BCP 92).

Or, as St. Paul says, Don't be stupid. Learn the lessons of the biblical story. Respond to God's grace with faith and faithfulness. For "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God *is* faithful, who will not [allow] you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear *it*."