



“Faith in a ‘Type A’ World”

a sermon by

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This week we turn to the beginning of the Gospel of Luke chapter 4, verses 1-13, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. This is the first story told of Jesus after his baptism by water and the Holy Spirit in the Jordan river. Here the Word of the Lord:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I will give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you, and on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.

There seems to be an impressive amount of conversation about "Type A" personalities as of late- Type A bosses, type A schools and, yes, even type A churches—if it is an institution in this world- financial, educational, social, even religious, it seems it is not safe. It is as if all this identification of Type-A-ness will somehow give us an excuse for the amounts of anxiety we heap upon ourselves. Now, my apologies to any psychologists in the room, but my intro psych definition of this phenomenon reveals about as much as any Google search. The type A personality exhibits three main characteristics: Time impatience, pervasive and often disproportionate hostility, and constant apprehension of future disasters. I don't know about you, but this doesn't describe anyone I've ever met?? Ok, so in fact it actually describes many people I know- and even a little bit of myself. My suspicion is, that even in just a quick review of the basics of our understanding of this behavior an image of our society begins to be recalled in our minds. And don't we feel it? Time impatience- either imposed upon us or brought upon ourselves- everything faster, smarter, more efficient. In a drive through society where entire symphonies can be condensed into the ring tone on a cell phone, we are somehow led to believe that if you can't at once be a perfect friend, parent, partner, colleague, leader of distinction, then you somehow don't add up. Value and worth are equated with time logged and there is a sense that the ideal is always out of reach- if not unknown. Ronald Regan quipped about this ideology in an interview during his presidency saying, 'even today I wonder what I could have accomplished if I had only studied harder'. A friend of mine recently was laid off of his job, but not before enduring a final campaign to overhaul programs to increase efficiency in his company. He recalls the unveiling of the new motto of the campaign in a company gift- underneath shiny cellophane wrapping was a box with the phrase 'if it isn't broken, break it' printed on the top, and a new watch bearing the same logo on the inside, that was set five minutes fast. A kickoff to a new season of work, and you're already five minutes behind. Ok, so ever-present hostilities. Well, a look at some of the Panther tailgating parties might speak to this, but so do short fuses

with loved ones, suspicion among colleagues, racial and social tensions, and tendencies towards violence when inhibitions are lowered or prison guard supervisors turn their backs. You don't have to look any further than the NJ turnpike for an example of this, where they actually have state-sponsored signs with a picture of two smiling cartoon-character cars shaking hands across a median with the exhortation "Drive Friendly" printed above. Ever present fear of future disasters...yellow alert, orange alert, red alert, amber alert. Is it any wonder that the rate of hypertension among adults is right around 30% nationwide? The NY Times reports that stress costs the US \$300 billion a year in healthcare costs and missed work. Christians have historically been persecuted by the world and now we are inundated by it as well.

And just when it seems that the ancient world is so far removed from what we face now that Jesus couldn't possibly understand this path we now tread- we come to our text for the day. Jesus is in the wilderness- he is hungry, he is on the edge of his ministry to the world, just after the first recorded exhortation of his adult Lordship by God: You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased." And wouldn't you know, Satan shows up. The scriptures deal with Satan in a lot of different ways- sometimes it is a person we can see, sometimes a cosmic force, a fallen divinity, forces from outside us or from within that seduce, but Satan never appeals beyond a person's power or their vanity. So, with what does Satan tempt our God? With the power of the world. If your so hungry Jesus, forget the spiritual nurture, feed yourself. If you want all power and dominion as is fitting for the Son of God- appropriate for such a king such as you, take it. Think of the good you could do. If you are so special, if you are going to make it in this gig and if you are who you say you are- prove it. The world will love you for it and you could accomplish all you could ever dream for your life and ministry, by just bowing to me (his offer, of course, characteristically omits the fine print of such proposals). Poor Jesus- alone in the wilderness, 30 years old, and the seduction and pressures of his Type A ancient world come knocking. In just three questions Satan cuts through to the core issues of power, identity, and basic human need. No wonder Luke calls him the slanderer, but boy is he sly. Because Jesus, alone and hungry in the wilderness had to have seen that each of these things Satan offered him would give him a quick and easy solution to his problems. They would win him favor, make his walk a lot easier. Maybe selling out wouldn't be so bad. And doesn't the slanderer's voice sound familiar in this passage? If you don't prove yourself, you might fail. If you don't take all that you can for yourself, you could starve. If you don't possess power and control, they will crucify you.

I'm not going to say that our society is somehow Satan incarnate. I don't believe that. But the pressures placed upon our discipleship today are not so dissimilar to what Jesus endured long ago- and he provided an answer. When so many other needs compete for our attention, 'One does not live by bread alone.' When so many other things vie for lordship over our life, 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' And when visions of failure and shame, humiliation and fear seem to be much more clear and close than those of fullness and wholeness, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' I'll let you in on a little secret, it's the cliff notes version of this passage: The Christian life and discipleship in Christ is about faithfulness, not success. Rise to the occasion of this world or not, and our God still loves you, and believes with a heart the size of eternity that you are perfect, that you are sufficient, and has entrusted you- YOU- with the proclamation of the good news of this love. That is all he asks.

The question is not how much do you earn, what did you check off the 'to do' list this week, how are your numbers looking, but how are you going to live the *gospel* today? Our soloist recalled the words of 1 Cor 13- if I possess all power, all gifts of prophesy, give all that I have to the poor but do all this without love, then it is all in vain. The challenge of living a life of faith and love in Christ shoulder to shoulder with a world with strong Type A tendencies can all be a bit confusing. The good news is that if you feel the tension, it is a sign you are doing something right. As one commentator reminds us, being committed to the way of God does not exempt one from struggle, but rather quite the contrary. After all, if Christ struggled, who then is exempt? The hard part is that real temptation beckons us to do that about which much good can be said. And it is easy to correlate our achievement oriented mindset with our notions about the quality of our faith journey. If we look to the standard of the world for guidance, then we will always fall short, because the world holds before us an ideal that simply does not exist. But if we look to the standard of Christ, we see that successful discipleship is not measured according to how many stones you turned to bread and in the presence of how many witnesses, but in the quality of your struggle to be faithful, and the shape of the steps we take in the wilderness. Amen.