

Lenten Sermon- The Temptation of Violence

Scripture: John 18:1-10

Sunday, March 1, 2020

Over the last few years the Mennonite church has established a tradition of going first in the Lenten Worship series. And one of the things that happen when you are positioned in a certain place in sequence is that the Lectionary scripture for that place is usually similar. At the start of Lent we are usually talking about the start of Jesus' earthly ministry, particularly his temptations in the wilderness. This is the passage I had dealt with last year but I am sure that none of you remember what I said last year 😊 Don't worry, I am not going to recycle my last sermon.

But the fact that one of the very first things that Jesus had to deal with at the start of his ministry were certain temptations is something that we need to ponder in our own spiritual preparation this Lenten season.

First, I want us to look at what is happening in Jesus life just before his temptations in the wilderness. What we see is that the story starts with Jesus' baptism. When Jesus comes to John the Baptist, the spirit comes upon him in a very visible form and he was baptized. But immediately after that the Holy Spirit takes Jesus into the wilderness and whom does he encounter there? The head of all the evil spirits, Satan himself. And what does Satan do? It presents Jesus with every kind of temptation over 40 days. Of course Jesus resists every temptation and goes on to successfully complete his mission. But the temptations he experienced did not end in 40 days. The 40 day period was a reflection and preparation period in which I am sure he wrestled with all the choices available to Him before he started his ministry. But Satan would have continued to tempt Jesus. One such moment would have occurred in the passage we read today as the Roman soldiers came to arrest him. At that time, he knew that he was giving himself into the hands of

the blood thirsty and cruel army. Within His humanity, every cell of his body would have been pleading for survival. Jesus at this point had many options. He could have invoked heavenly armies that could have more than overpowered the Romans. Jesus of course resists this temptation. But Peter who is with Jesus also experiences this same hostile environment, he cannot resist but takes his sword and lashes out at a Roman soldier, cutting off his ear in one fell swoop.

At this point, Jesus stops the whole proceeding, picks up the ear, heals Balchus the soldier, reprimands Peter for using the sword.

Jesus teaches us something powerful in that moment and if we have to learn this lesson, we have to rewind the tape to the moment Jesus and his disciples face the Roman soldiers and temple guards who had come to arrest Jesus.

You see the moment of the face off is when the tension is the highest. One small move can cause all hell to break loose. Any human reaction in this environment is not going to be a well considered one but a panicky jerk for survival. This is exactly what you see Apostle Peter do. He takes out his sword and lunges for the attack.

Now it may be Peter who acted, but you can be sure that Peter was not the only one who was feeling threatened. Everyone on Jesus' side would have felt the same level of threat. The thought on everybody's mind would have been that this could be our last day. The Romans were not shy about killing people. And when we you are facing someone who is capable and intentioned to do harm, your mind has only one thought, kill or be killed, right? We can call this human instinct, or the survival instinct. It is the reason why we have so many guns in the country. People want to have the capacity to kill before they are killed.

Now the enemy of God, is using this instinct for self-preservation which is a necessary part of life, (if not we all would be running of a cliff), into this instinct for violence in the name of survival.

But here is where everything changes when you are a disciple of Christ. What happens is this. As a disciple of Christ, you are not just the follower of a wonderful teacher, you are the follower of the great I AM. Jesus emphasizes this by repeating the phrase I AM three times in this encounter with the Roman soldiers, in verse 5,6 and then 8. In fact every time he uttered the words I AM the soldiers fell to the ground. We have to understand the power of who we are following. I AM is the God who was in the beginning, is now and who will forever be. He spoke and the universe came into being. He then became flesh and dwelt among us. His name was revealed as Jesus. He is the one who has asked us to follow him.

So if we are following not just any teacher but the great I AM, here is where things are different. The one we are following is fully aware of the situation we are in. The one we are following is fully in charge of the situation we are in. Not a hair will fall from our head without His knowledge. God knows all things, control all things and has a plan for all things. In this situation, from a human standpoint the situation for Jesus' disciples looks very threatening. But from God's perspective, the soldiers were there to arrest Jesus and in the violence to follow no disciple was going to be harmed. All the violence would be absorbed by Jesus. And even Jesus would rise again on the third day to declare complete victory over Satan, sin and death. So when you look at the big picture what Jesus' disciples needed to see was that it was the God who created them that is working on their behalf, to protect their life not just in this life but in eternity as well. So if we are Christ followers, even our instincts need to change. We don't need to pull the first punch because God has the whole situation in our hands.

But Jesus did win a battle with evil even on that day. You see when Peter cut off the ear of the soldier, Jesus picked up the ear and healed the soldier right there. That act of blessing the one who came to attack was so transformative that that soldier church history tells us because a Christ follower himself at some point. That is why we know the name of this soldier, Malchus. Malchus would have become a well known leader in the church at some point and his name is recorded for every generation to see. On the contrary, if Peter would have murdered Malchus', Malchus would have been eternally lost and how many others because he was not there to lead the early church.

How does this make a difference to our lives? Well, our lives are a real struggle for becoming more like Christ. It is great to call ourselves Christian, but when we are threatened, in that moment the temptation we face is the temptation of violence. You and I may not be faced with the temptation to kill first, but we might be faced with the temptation to hit back verbally, say something or do something designed to hurt or put someone down. In that moment, the challenge we face is to remember we are Christ's followers and that calls for a completely different gut instinct to react to the situation we are faced with. Whatever the situation, we are called to not hit back but love, not attack but bless, not hurt but to absorb hurt. Christ followers are called to repair the ear of our enemies but cut them off. And in doing so, we might give all heaven cause to rejoice.

So as we begin our Lenten journey, let us reflect on our temptations, especially our temptation towards violence of any kind. Let us reflect on how we have reacted in the past. Let us repent of any unChristlike reactions we may have. Let us reach deeper to the power available to us to overcome the voice of the enemy in our ears and reach out to heal. May God give us great victory in becoming more like him this Lenten season. Let us pray.