



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

Matthew 4:1-11, Genesis

February 10, 2008

1st Sunday in Lent

“Lenten Limits”

I spent last weekend in my hometown of Winnipeg, preaching in my childhood congregation and leading a workshop related to my book. I was reminded that a good time to visit Winnipeg is in the summer – I never did get used to the cold! It was wonderful to reconnect with my sisters and their families, my parents, and with the church folk in Winnipeg. At the workshop there were people from approximately 10 different congregations, United Church, Anglican, Lutheran, and Mennonite. I brought them greetings from Canadian Memorial.

The night before I returned, I visited my friends Aiden and Karen in their home. Before they moved to Winnipeg, they worshiped at Canadian Memorial. Karen is an artist and Aiden is the editor and publisher of the award-winning magazine *Geez*. It’s targeted at young, progressive and/or disillusioned evangelical Christians. It’s very hip, extremely well written, and the most alternative Christian magazine I’ve ever come across. Whenever I spend time with Aiden and Karen I come away a little disoriented. They are into “downward mobility”, divesting of possessions wherever they can, and living lives of voluntary simplicity. *Geez* magazine has no advertising, managing to pay

for itself totally through subscriptions. I toured the “production facility” – one of their spare bedrooms. The magazine is being produced on aging Macintosh computers.

We shared a Saskatchewan-brewed beer together and caught up with each other’s lives. Their living room is furnished with older, but comfortable furniture. They choose to live in Winnipeg because it’s a fringe city, lacking the sex appeal and allure of a city like Vancouver. They believe that this is the reason why the arts and culture are so alive and vibrant in Winnipeg. It’s a city that lives off the grid of the dominant cultural values, free to explore alternative visions of what it means to be human.

They don’t run their car in the winter. Instead they take the bus, and Karen rides her bike. The house is situated on a double-lot. They have plans to build a straw-bale house on it, and live off the electricity grid. Aiden is convinced that we’re headed for an ecological crisis, and only those who have learned to live simply will be prepared. They want to live in solidarity with the poor. But they don’t flaunt it and they don’t come across as holier-than-thou. They just live differently. While they are modeling downward mobility, it seems to me

that spiritually they are on an upward ascent.

Karen just quit her job because it wasn't allowing her to do her art. The magazine has only very recently begun to pay Aiden a very modest salary. They can afford to follow their passion because they are living simply. They don't need much money.

Their witness, as I've mentioned, invariably causes me to question how I am living and what it means to be "Christian" in our culture.

Lent is the six-week season of the church year when we metaphorically walk with Jesus as he sets his face toward an awaiting cross. It's a journey toward deep integrity. The Lenten teachings put on us a collision course with the messages we receive from our culture around what integrity means. Jesus is into the mathematics of subtraction, while our culture advocates addition – accumulating and acquiring more and more stuff. Lent is a season of stripping down, laying bare what lies beneath the trappings that we so often confuse with our lives. Who are we when we lay aside our striving for success, power, wealth, and all our "stuff"? The ultimate expression of this trappings-free life is Christ on the cross. Talk about an image of downward mobility! To follow Christ is to enter into a period of discernment – of learning to distinguish between the voice of Spirit and the voice of the ego and the "culture of more" that it has created. In Lent, we re-establish some limits in order to get our bearings.

The story of Adam and Eve and the story of Jesus' temptations can be read through the lens of limits. Take the story of Adam and Eve. God metaphorically places the first couple in the middle of a beautiful garden and makes it clear that what is Hers is theirs. They can eat freely of all the fruit from all the trees in the garden, with one exception – the tree in the center of the garden. Eat that fruit or even touch it and God warns, you will surely die. But the serpent – a symbol for the part of us that doesn't like to be told there are any limits – is not happy. He hears what he wants to hear, creating confusion and whispering to us, "Did God say you couldn't eat from *any* tree in the garden?" Well, no, actually - just the one, single limitation.

Then the serpent tells the woman that she won't die if she eats the fruit. God is worried, the serpent suggests, that if you eat it you'll be like God, knowing good and evil. It's an interesting ploy. First create confusion and then create distrust. After all, in this creation myth, this is the serpent's take on what is going on. It's not God's take. God is simply saying that there are limits. It may be true that we can't handle limit-free existence. There is something inside of us, after we've done a line or two, or polished off the bottle that tells us that we can judge between good and evil, and this is obviously good for us because it *feels* so good! It's all yours, God is saying in this story, but remember, limits are part of the deal. Without limits, you will bring death upon yourself and others.

We are living in the first period of human history when humans are able to entertain the fantasy of living without limits. In the modern age, humanity made wonderful technological and scientific progress, which has unquestionably improved the quality of our lives. But there is a shadow-side. Our refusal to accept any limits, to want *all* the fruit, not just most of it, is devastating the earth, causing us to colonize the entire planet at the expense of other-than-human creatures, creating unconscionable gaps between the rich and the poor, and turning us into hyper-individualists equating financial wealth with freedom. The powerful nations are positioning themselves to take control of supplies of water and oil, and if history is any indication, doing this by peaceful means is not a limitation they will accept. The wisdom of the creation myth holds up this many years later. We have eaten the apple of no-limit living, and we are indeed becoming purveyors of death.

The story of Christ's temptation in the wilderness carries forward the theme. Once again, a shadowy figure is part of the story, this time symbolized, not by a snake, but by "the Satan". We can think of both of these figures as mythological embodiments of our ego as well as the voice of our culture, rationalizing the no-limit lie – that we can and should have it all.

One of the problems with the way we've typically thought about Jesus – as a kind of superman in a robe

– capable of leaping tall buildings – is that it diminishes his humanity. But Jesus struggled with limits. Like you and like me. The temptations were as real for him as for any of us. A part of him actually *was* tempted by what the world calls "having it all". The superman model of Jesus has caused most of us to assume that these temptations were little more than hoops Jesus had to jump through to pass the test en route to being the Son of God – a mere formality. After all he *was* God, wasn't he? I'm not buying it. Jesus was struggling with whether to go with abundance as defined by Caesar's Kingdom or the subversive spiritual abundance of God's Kingdom.

Satan first goes for the gut, literally. The first temptation has to do with food, a basic human need. Jesus has been fasting. He's hungry. Why not just snap his fingers, and turn the stones into bread? An inner voice is sounding inside Jesus' head. You're the Son of God, man. You can have anything you want. And you can have it *right now!* Does anybody else recognize this voice? It is the air we breathe. You can have the Tag Hauser watch, the private jet, and the latest model this or that; you can have untold success if you just learn to think the right thoughts and banish the negativity. Credit cards tempt us with low interest rates for the first six months, with no limit spending. You can have it. You should want it. Why not go after it? So the U.S. finds itself in what they are calling a credit crisis. Low interest loans fed the fantasy that everyone could share in the good life.

Now they are finding out that it was all an illusion.

Jesus turns Satan down, claiming that we don't live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Let's say he turned the trick and satisfied his own hunger. What about the throngs of other hungry people? Does he have a magic potion in his bag to pull off that trick? Right now, four or five food conglomerates worldwide control our food production. They literally have the power to remake our bodies in their image and according to what makes the most profit. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan helps us to understand that human beings are walking corn. Why? Corn is cheap and efficient. They can turn it, magically, into beef, pork, chicken, soft drinks, sugar, and protein. It's making North Americans obese. It's also destroying the soil because it depletes nitrogen and requires vast amounts of fertilizer that end up in our rivers, that end up in our bodies.

Seed companies are able, through technological wizardry, to turn not stones into bread, but seeds into money and lots of it. Employing the no-limit ethic they are genetically modifying the DNA of seeds to be fungicide and pesticide resistant, which means that you can pour vast amounts of these chemicals into the soil. This increases the yield, which creates a glut, which drives down prices, which means that farmers have to buy ever more of these seeds to make ends meet, from the company who now has patented the seeds, which means that

there is a glut, which means you have to do something with all the extra product, which means it ends up being our food.

When Jesus says that we don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, he is saying that food is not a technological problem to be solved. It's a profoundly spiritual issue. We need to be thinking about healthy food for people, *all* the people; we need to be thinking about downsizing these mega-farms, and supporting local, organic growers all over the world – and certainly right in our backyard. We need to place limits on the mentality that equates food with profit. The miracle that needs to be performed is the transformation of our own consciousness around our own food. Here are three short Lenten limits around food that Michael Pollan offers: eat less, eat closer to the source, and eat mostly organic vegetables.

The Second Temptation

Then Satan tempts Jesus by challenging him to throw himself off the Temple wall. He even quotes Scripture to Jesus, a Psalm that says that God's angels will bear us up if he will dare to take the leap from a high place. The premise of the temptation is that God is not *already* bearing Jesus up – that Jesus is somehow currently lacking in divine support. We all have dark periods when we imagine that God is nowhere to be found. We know this geography of wilderness. When my first marriage broke up and I was in grief at being separated from my

daughter, I put God to the test. I started asking for tangible signs that God was there. I cringe when I think about this. That very night, I had a dream in which an older, wise woman came up to me and looked deeply at my face. She asked me if I realized that I had angels dancing on my face.

We have 50 trillion cells in our bodies, each making proteins day in and day out so that we may have life. We have a sun that's burning 4 million tons of hydrogen every second to give life to the earth. The entire history of the universe is alive within us, giving us life. It is precisely calibrated down to decimal points – the size of the earth had to be exactly the size it is, the distance from the sun had to be exact, the rate at which the universe is expanding, the force of gravity, all had to be exactly as they are so that we might have life and consciousness and love. This floating blue-gem called the earth is sitting in the palm of God's hand. The Spirit-drenched cosmos is bearing us up with every breath we take. And still we ask for signs and proof?

In Lent, we can practice trusting God instead of testing God. When we're always looking around for signs that God cares, it most often means that we've stopped noticing the angels that have never stopped dancing on our faces. We need to limit our testing, and maximize our trusting. Here's a poem by Denise Levertov, entitled *The Avowal*. It's about throwing herself onto the grace of God, not as a test, but as act of trust.

As swimmers dare to lie face
to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air and air
sustains them,
so would I learn to
attain freefall,
and float into Creator Spirit's
deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns that
all-surrounding grace.

The Final Temptation

Finally, Satan, that inner voice that wants it all and wants it on his or her terms, takes Jesus up to a high mountain. In God's Kingdom a high mountain is a thin place, where the veil that separates this realm from the spiritual realm is thin. In Satan's Kingdom – the realm of our ego and the culture of more – a mountain is a vantage point from which to imagine it's mine, all mine.

What is it about human beings that we want to *possess* beauty? We can't just enjoy it. We must *have* it! Every time I visit a new place I find myself in front of a real estate window looking at properties, wondering how much it would take to own a little piece of this world. It's insane. I don't want any more property. I don't even take care of the property I own. I don't have time. I already feel like I'm a slave to my home. I want to sell it and move into an apartment that somebody else is responsible for. The ego is an insatiable possessor. It gathers all things unto itself, and clutches them close to its breast, as a bulwark against

the rising tide of death and the exigencies of life. And then one day, we wake up to discover that the possessor has taken possession of us.

The history of humanity may be told as the bloody story of the possessor, first acquiring through bloodshed land from indigenous people who had no word for ownership, and then building armies and making laws to defend what was never ours in the first place against possessors of other lands. There are indications that the wealthy nations of the world are once again being led up a high mountain from which they are being shown the lands wherein lie the diminishing oil reserves, uranium, gold, and fresh water. The cost of all this splendour is the destruction of the very beauty we so long for.

The story says that Jesus can have it all if he is but willing to fall to his knees and worship Satan. This is a metaphor that describes the choice to offer our ultimate allegiance to the grasping ego and the culture of more, a capitulation to the forces of history strewn with the blood, sweat, and tears of the victims of the takers. As long as we get our little piece, worshiping Satan means turning a blind eye to the all that our comfort is built upon.

Here's the thing about this temptation story. It's happening in you and me right now. It's not a tale about something that Jesus went through on our behalf 2000 years ago. In Lent we come face to face with the part of us that rails against limits and honours and elects those who make promises to

feed our insatiable appetite for more and more and more. Jesus quotes the First Commandment in response to the Satan. Worship God alone.

Welcome to the wilderness of Lent, friends. This is the stage upon which the battle for our soul still goes on. This is the season when we say "no" to more. Satan fled the moment Jesus gave his heart into God's care and keeping and the angels came and ministered to him. Still today, the angels are waiting in the wings for us to open our hearts to the unlimited love of God. Then our true hunger shall be quelled, and we shall find ourselves sustained in the thermals of grace, and we will discover the true wealth that accrues to those who are possessed by love alone.