

**Questions of the Cross:  
STORY**

**Luke 4:1-13**

*What happens when story  
meets history in the cross?*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
Fort Smith, Arkansas  
March 10, 2019

In Bladensburg, Maryland, there is a 40-foot tall cross known as the Peace Cross. It is at the intersection of three roads, and it is part of the Maryland state historical site system. It is a memorial to soldiers from the local county who died in World War I. The cross was dedicated in 1925 and has been a local landmark ever since. In 2017, a lawsuit was filed by the American Humanist Association saying that the maintenance of the cross memorial by the state was unconstitutional. A lower court agreed, and in November of last year, the Supreme Court of the United States agreed to hear the case. They heard arguments in January, but have yet to render a verdict.

The argument by the Humanists is that the cross is a Christian symbol, and the state should not be involved in taking care of a religious symbol. The argument by the state and the American Legion, the defendants in the case, is that the cross is not necessarily religious. It is historical and part of the American experience. It reflects the gravestones on the final resting places of our soldiers in Europe.

I hate to side with an atheist organization, but I partially see their point. I don't think we should necessarily do away with all historical memorials, monuments, and government buildings that have religious symbolism; that would be most of them. But I do agree that the cross is Christian. There is no way around it. It is not a secular symbol of peace. It is more than an American historical tradition. The cross is where Jesus died, and it was anything but peaceful. The cross is at the heart of our faith.

This season of Lent, as we often do, we will be focusing on the Cross and the events surrounding the Passion and Death of Jesus. I usually put together the sermon series we do, sometimes with input from Dane, but last fall I asked him to take the lead on the Lenten series this year. Dane found a book by Samuel Wells titled *Hanging By A Thread: The Questions of the Cross*.<sup>1</sup> Wells is an Anglican priest, the Vicar of St. Martins in the Fields in London. But for several years he was the Dean of the Chapel at—where else?—Duke University.

Wells says that there was a time when the cross was an answer. It answered the eternal question of salvation; the cross is how we get there. The cross answered the question of why the church existed, because the

Jews had killed Christ. The cross was the reason western Christianity expanded into empires, because we had the cross (and therefore the grace of God), and the heathens did not.

But today, in our post-modern, post-Christendom world, the cross is more of a question. It brings up questions about the nature of God, the person of Jesus, the mission of the church, and our relationship with the non-Christian world. In former days, we did not have to pay attention to these questions. But Wells says, “Now that the cross is a question we fear to pay attention because we find the question so frightening, and we’re terrified to face it because we are afraid it may not have an answer. And our faith will be hanging by a thread.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus the title of the book. So what we want you to do for a few weeks this Lenten season is to consider the question of the cross and the challenge it gives to our faith. Usually Lent is sort of an exercise in make-believe; we pretend to follow Jesus to the cross, all the while knowing that in the end there is Easter. It makes the cross and Good Friday much less frightening. This year, try imagining what it was like before they knew Easter was coming, before the disciples understood the predictions of Jesus, when they thought the cross was the end of it all. Their faith was hanging by a thread. When you hang by a thread, you can truly come to appreciate the grace and the power of God.

One of the first stories we tell during Lent is the Temptation of Jesus. Jesus had just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. The heavens had opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him, and the voice of God spoke his identity: “*You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased.*”<sup>3</sup> Then, full of the Holy Spirit (a detail which only Luke mentions), Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The wilderness is not a desert; it is a specific location between Jerusalem and Jericho. It is mountainous and rocky and full of caves. Today there is a monastery on a mountain west of Jericho that is built over a cave where they believe Jesus slept during his temptation.

Wherever he was, he was tempted for forty days, like the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for forty years. He wasn’t just hanging out for

39½ days, then Satan showed up. It was forty whole days of temptation. All we hear is the final conversation.

We might wonder why the temptation occurred at this point. You might think Jesus would be on a spiritual high after his baptism, and he could ride that wave for a while. But so often it seems the greatest spiritual struggles happen right after the greatest spiritual victories. No sooner do we stand on the mountaintop than the Enemy tries to knock us back down into the valley.

John Wesley had his spiritual awakening in a Bible study in Aldersgate Street in London. All you good Methodists know that. But did you know that he felt the immediate temptation to discount the experience he had just had? In his Journal, Wesley writes, “It was not long before the enemy suggested, ‘This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?’ ...After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations, but I cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again.”<sup>4</sup> If you open yourself to the experience of the Spirit, you will also have the experience of temptation. This is not news.

Luke then gives the three temptations that Satan laid before Jesus in the same words but in a different order from Matthew. First is the temptation to turn stones into bread. Jesus was hungry, and he had the power to feed himself miraculously. But instead he quoted a verse from Deuteronomy, “*One does not live by bread alone.*”<sup>5</sup>

Then the devil took Jesus to the top of a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. He offered Jesus total political domination, if Jesus would just worship him. Jesus turned again to Deuteronomy to answer the temptation: “*It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’*”<sup>6</sup>

Then the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, the corner that looked out over the Kidron Valley. It was about a 250-foot drop to the valley below. Quoting from Psalm 91, the devil encouraged Jesus to depend on Scripture and jump, trusting that God would save him. Surely that would make front-page news in the Jerusalem Gazette. But Jesus responded again with a word from Deuteronomy: “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*”<sup>7</sup>

So having failed to divert Jesus from his identity, his faith or his mission, the devil left him, it says, “*until an opportune time.*”<sup>8</sup> I can picture him, walking away in frustration, backwards, saying, “This is not over!”

I have preached some clever sermons about how our temptations are like the temptations of Jesus, only milder. But this week I read a commentary by United Methodist pastor and teacher James Howell that brought me up short. He said that these temptations are not about us. (What? Not about us? All thought everything was about us!) These temptations are about Jesus, the Son of God, in a confrontation with the Lord of Evil. We would never make it forty days in the wilderness in the first place. We wouldn’t stand a chance against this kind of assault.

Howell says, “The point of this story is how amazing Jesus is. He did what you and I could never do, and that we (what a relief!) don’t have to do. Jesus isn’t our moral example, showing us how to combat Satan. Jesus is our Savior, for all the times, for all of life, when we succumb, when we drink the Koolaid and fall for the devil’s wiles. This story should make us fall on our knees in awe. Jesus. Wow. What a Savior.”<sup>9</sup>

The story of Jesus is so powerful precisely because this is not our story. This is the story of God’s action to save us through his incarnate Son. Jesus recapitulates and fulfills all that God has been trying to do with God’s people from the beginning. He is the embodiment of the covenant. Being baptized in the Jordan recalls Joshua entering the Promised Land through the same water. Forty days in the wilderness recalls the forty years Israel wandered. Jesus preached on a mountain like Moses brought down the law from Mount Sinai. Jesus was transfigured on a mountain, and Moses and Elijah showed up. His body was destroyed on the cross like the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonian armies. And just as Israel found new life and new hope when they were in exile in Babylon, so we find new life and new hope when Jesus has his moment of exile on the cross and cries out, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”<sup>10</sup> Jesus took the plunge; he made the leap; he gave himself for us, and the angels did not catch him.

So where does the history of Jesus meet our story? That’s why we are here today. We believe that somehow this story that happened long ago in

a faraway place has relevance and meaning for our lives today. That's why we come here week after week.

The temptations of Jesus are not our temptations. But we are tempted. We do struggle. We feel under attack sometimes. We are pulled to do things we know are wrong. You can name your own better than I can. This is not a sign of weakness. This is a sign that you are making spiritual progress. You are growing full of the spirit. The more Christ-like you become, the more you will be attacked. But the more you endure, the stronger you will become.

The Letter of James says, *“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”*<sup>11</sup>

We have resources to battle temptation. We can remember our identity as children of God. We can look to the example of Jesus. He used the Scripture to defeat the devil. We have more Scripture than he did. We have the Holy Spirit inside of us. We are not defenseless against temptation.

But a decision is required. We have to decide whose side we're on. We have to choose whom we will follow. Not once, but daily, hourly sometimes. Luke says the devil departed Jesus “until an opportune time.” Do you think the devil didn't come back until Jesus was crucified? No, he was there every day, tugging at the heart, pulling at the mind, offering an easy way, a different path that would take Jesus down the wrong road. Jesus never took the bait.

The American poet Robert Frost wrote “The Road Not Taken” in 1916. It contains the famous lines,

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”<sup>12</sup>

The path of discipleship is the road less travelled. But nothing in our lives will make as much difference as the daily decision to follow Jesus.

Most of us read in junior high or high school the classic novel by Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities*. The plot of the book turns on the physical resemblance between two very different men. Charles Darnay is a French

aristocrat who has a beautiful wife named Lucie. In the years prior to the French Revolution, the Darnay family is responsible for untold suffering on the part of the French peasants, including the imprisonment of Lucie's father. The other man is Sidney Carton, an English lawyer with a drinking problem, who also loved Lucie, but failed to win her hand in marriage.

At the end of the novel, Charles Darnay is arrested and taken to Paris to face the guillotine. But Sidney, who looks like Charles and is still in love with Lucie, desires to do something finally with his life that makes a difference. So he drugs Darnay and goes to the guillotine in his place. His famous last words: "It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known."<sup>13</sup>

The cross of Jesus is not our cross. But the sacrifice of Sidney Carton shows us that we can take up our cross and follow Jesus. We cannot return to the turbulent events of first-century Jerusalem, but we can enfold our lives in God's story and be transformed by the sacrifice of Jesus. Samuel Wells writes, "Like Sidney Carton, we each face moments in our existence when we have the chance to say or do something that shows what we believe life is for, existence is about, and truth is made of. Jesus' sacrificial death is that far, far better thing. Our connection to it may seem, for much of our life, to hang by a thread. But when we face the moment of truth, we come face to face with the cross. And we discover that, [there] hanging by the thread, is none other than Jesus."<sup>14</sup>

And that's where you find the grace and power of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Wells, *Hanging By A Thread: The Questions of the Cross* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Wells, p. 1f.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:22.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Journal, May 24, 1738," *Works, Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:4.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:8.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 4:12.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 4:13.

<sup>9</sup> James Howell, "Ash Wednesday and Lent 1,"

<http://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 15:34.

---

<sup>11</sup> James 1:2-4.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Road\\_Not\\_Taken](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Road_Not_Taken).

<sup>13</sup> Wells, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Wells. P. 21.