

Patching the Bullet Holes that Matter Most

Luke 4:1-13

Grace Hills Baptist Church

March 10, 2019

I want to start this morning with a story from the Second World War. Like many World War II stories, this one “starts with the Nazis hounding a Jew out of Europe and ends with the Nazis regretting it.”¹ Abraham Wald was born in Romania and studied mathematics in Vienna. Yet when he graduated in the mid-1930s, eastern Europe was in danger. Wald read the writing on the wall and started looking for a safe harbor.

That safe harbor came in a professorship at Columbia in New York. When America entered the war, Professor Wald joined other academic luminaries in the Statistical Research Group, a classified project that sought to harness the best minds to solve the most difficult problems of warfare. They computed the optimal ammunition load for fighter planes and the correct mixture of rocket propellant for Navy bombers to use in their ordinance. The group included famous statisticians and mathematicians, including Nobel laureate Milton Friedman and the creator

¹ Ellenberg, How Not to Be Wrong

of cybernetics Norbert Wiener. Yet among this credentialed group, the refugee Jew Abraham Wald was about to make his mark.

One of the most confusing elements of this war was air-to-air combat; the ability of aircraft to carry heavy bombloads and cause massive damage in the enemy's home bases was a brand-new concept. It was so new, in fact, that the generals didn't know what they didn't know. American bombers were pounding Germany every day, but in the process the squadrons were getting cut to pieces. What could be done about this? Could they armor their aircraft better?

The military officers came to the Statistical Research Group with this question and a pile of data; they had studied the damage patterns in all the aircraft that returned from combat missions. That data led the officers to think that they needed to up-armor a few key places on their aircraft, namely, the wings and the fuselage. After all, that's where most of the bullet holes were. Wouldn't it make sense that extra armor in those key places would mean more planes would make it home and more young American servicemen would survive? "That was the answer they came to Wald for. It wasn't the answer they got...The armor, said Wald, doesn't go

where the bullet holes are. It goes where the bullet holes aren't: on the engines."²

Professor Wald realized something all those professional military officers and pilots hadn't realized yet: the planes that landed with wings that looked like Swiss cheese and fuselages peppered with punctures didn't suffer fatal hits. But the aircraft that had been hit in the engines or in the cockpit – in other words, the planes that had been hit in the areas that were absolutely required to fly home – well, those planes weren't making it back. That's where the extra armor was needed. If you protected the vital areas, the places where one hit could cause a crash, you significantly raised the likelihood that the plane would make it back to its base. The armor goes where the bullet holes aren't, because some bullet holes matter more than others... and you want to patch the bullet holes that matter most.

Strange as it may seem, Professor Wald's insight has a lot to do with understanding our Scripture passage this morning. We are now in the season of Lent. Lent is the time in the church year when we pause to reflect on the things that come between us and God and that come between us and one another. The Christian word for such things is sin. Sin is anything that ruptures the relationships in our lives. The way of

² Ellenberg

Jesus teaches us that freedom and salvation from sin heal our relationships with God and with one another. Lent reminds us each year to tend to those practices and mindsets that draw us away from God and one another.

On the face of it, we may wonder why we need such a regular reminder to get rid of the sin in our lives and live fully in relationship with God and others. Yet sin is, above all, enticing; it is tempting. So it is no accident that the Gospel passage on the first Sunday of Lent every year is some version of the story of Jesus facing temptation. Soon after his baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and to pray and to be tested by Satan, the great adversary. And, as Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us, at the end of the forty days these three temptations stand out: Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger, Jesus is tempted to bow down to Satan in order to gain political power and dominion over the world, and Jesus is tempted to try to force God's hand by jumping off the Temple.

Now, I've got to tell you something: when I was a young man reading the New Testament, I wondered why we talked about the temptation of Jesus so much. The three temptations or tests he faced seemed to be so unique to him, and so foreign to me, I didn't really pay them much mind. Of course Jesus would be tempted to turn stones into bread – but I can't do

that, so why would that be a temptation for me? Of course Jesus would be tempted to rule the world through domination instead of through a sacrificial death and resurrection – but I won't ever face that choice, right? And of course Jesus would be tempted to prove God's miraculous presence with him by jumping off the Temple – but I know I'd make a very big *splat* if I tried that, so it's not all that tempting. Why worry about this passage of Scripture? Why not just read through it quickly and get to the parts of the Jesus story that really matter to my life and the lives of the people I know?

As I've grown older and maybe even a little wiser, I've come to realize that my younger self didn't know what he was talking about when it came to this passage of Scripture. While I may never actually be tempted to turn stones into bread or worship Satan or jump off the Temple roof, I face the temptations Jesus faced every day. So do you. They are all too common. And when we really look at them, we find that these are the temptations that can wreck our faith. These are the bullet holes that matter.

The first temptation Jesus faces in the passage is the temptation of appetite. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." After 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, we are told Jesus was famished. I'm sure all the stones started looking like tasty loaves of bread! Jesus had a legitimate need, a physical hunger, and Satan played on that

hunger. “You’re out here fasting in the wilderness, – but go ahead! Use your power to feed your appetite!” Who among us hasn’t felt that, at some point in time? “So what if you’re saving up for something for your family – get that costly trinket you’ve got your eye on! Who cares if you’re trying to get healthier and eat better – have the Krispy Kreme doughnut! I know you’re trying to cut back on expenses so you can be generous with those in need – but go ahead and spend your money on yourself! Yes, buying a more fuel efficient car would be better for the planet – but get that gas guzzler! It’ll be more fun, and listen to that engine roar!” Satan’s words ring in our ears, tempting us to feed our own appetite more than we should, even when it could harm us or someone else. The temptation of appetite and consumption is a very present one in our lives, as it was for Jesus.

The second temptation is the temptation to control. Jesus’ mission was to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom coming and taking root – but it would have been much easier if he had been tasked to force people into accepting that kingdom. This is what Satan offered him: “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...If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’” No arrest, no trial before Pilate, no beating, no crucifixion and tortuous death. Also no

crowds puzzled by his teaching, no disciples who were wishy-washy on the details, no appeals to follow God. It would have been just a neat-and-tidy, command and it shall be done kind of mission.

I don't know about anyone else, but the temptation to control everything I possibly can so things turn out the way I want is a pretty big one for me. Most of us have a certain way we want life to go, a certain predictability we'd like to accompany us in our day-to-day, and about the only way we can ensure that things fall into place is to be in charge of as much as we can. Authority is what gets things done, so we are constantly tempted to seek and seize more and more authority, more and more control over ourselves, over others, and over our world. We want to control our families, our calendars, our own health. We want to control our schools and our workplaces, we want to control our local government and our national politics. We even want to control what God is doing and how God does it. The temptation of control or authority, especially in the form of dominion over others, is very real for us.

The third temptation sees Jesus faced with perhaps the greatest test: the temptation to force God's hand. The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple – in front of God and everyone – and says, "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.’”

In other words, “Jesus, you say you’re God’s Son. Prove it! Make God follow through on his promises!”

Of all three temptations, this may be the one we most often ignore – until our backs are against the wall. Of course we won’t call God on his promises – until we get bad health news at the doctor’s, or find our finances stretched to the breaking point, or struggle with a child who has rebelled to the point of self-destruction, or discover that the world is not fair, and we’re on the negative side of that equation. We beg, we plead, we pray...and, at times, we are tempted to give God an ultimatum. “Save me, save my child, save my family, Lord, if you really are the God you say you are!” On difficult days, this temptation is quite near.

All three of these temptations – the temptation of unrequited appetite, the temptation of controlling everything we can, and the temptation to call God out – these are quite real. And if we’re not careful, if we give into them over and over, we can find that they are the temptations that can irreparably damage our faith. Seeking fulfillment and purpose in anything of this world – overindulging our physical, mental, and emotional appetites – can lead us away from finding our fulfillment and purpose in God. Trying

to control every aspect of our lives, even to the point of dominating others, keeps us from allowing God himself to be our Lord, our Master, our King. And trying to force God's hand – even on promises pledged to us in Scripture – that can put us in an untenable place if things do not turn out the way we want, imperiling our faith just when we need it most.

Like Jesus, we face these temptations – and they are the temptations that are the most dangerous for us as people of faith. They are the shots that hit in the vital areas of our lives. And so, like the American airplanes of World War II, these are the areas that we need more armor. These are the bullet holes that need to be patched – and that's exactly what we find Jesus did when he faced these temptations. Using the teachings of Scripture, the record of what God's people had discovered about God through the centuries, he spoke words of reminder that helped him pass the tests.

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

“To you I will give [the glory and power of the kingdoms of the world] and all this authority...If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”

“It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The words of Scripture, the past experience of God’s people and Jesus’ own experience, gave him the armor to withstand the shots coming his way and to continue to faithfully follow God. “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

What temptations are coming your way? What tests are straining your faith? Some may be big, some may be small, some may be perfectly predictable, some may come out of nowhere...but all can strike home. All can damage or destroy our faith. The question is, what can we do to prepare? Should we worry about the peripheral matters, the small details that we can obsess over and get all fired up about? Should we dabble in the more esoteric elements of our faith, debating the merits of speaking in tongues, understanding angels, or getting concerned about how strange Old Testament taboos may apply to us, 25 centuries and half a world removed? Should we focus on the minor, obscure, and ultimately less dangerous temptations and tests?

Or should we, like Jesus, armor ourselves with the grand story of God’s revelation, knowing his teachings about the most important things? Should we place our trust and our hope in the God of the Universe, the Lord of all? Should we look to him, not as some vending machine in the

sky, but as the Truth we build our lives around? We can leave ourselves open to these three core temptations that will attack us all – or we can prepare to survive the hits that could bring our faith crashing down. How? By studying the Scriptures, tending our relationship with God, building bridges with those around us, and making the love of God our default approach to everyone and everything we encounter. When we do, we'll keep God at the center, look to him for guidance, and trust in his love...and that will do for us what it did for Jesus: armor us against the dangers of temptation that can tear our faith apart. If we're going to follow Jesus, we will face temptation and testing. Let's prepare to face it and defeat it by patching the bullet holes that matter most. Let us pray.