

Sermon Preached on
First Sunday in Lent
(February 14, 2016)

“Tempted by Fate”

When I was in my twenties and seriously considering going to seminary, I had to meet with a group in my diocese called "The Commission on Ministry." They are the group responsible not only for screening aspirants to the ministry but also supporting them throughout the long and convoluted process.

I remember early on in the process, one of the members of the commission asked me, "If you go to seminary, you have to be prepared to risk losing your faith?"

To which I thought (but was too afraid to say), "Are you crazy?" Without my faith, why would I ever go to seminary?

Over time, however, I came to understand what they meant. They didn't mean Faith in Christ, belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

What they meant was that many enter seminary with dearly held but false or at least naïve notions of what our faith is. Many enter seminary not wanting to be challenged or stretched in their life with Christ but to have their preconceived notions confirmed (and maybe congratulated).

What they meant was that some entering seminary believed, for example, that God can only love Christians, that baptism guarantees heaven, that receiving communion is getting your spiritual clock punched, that God can only speak through the bible (and the King James translation at that).

What they meant was that some think being a minister of the Gospel is all about incense, chanting, organs and preaching.

What they meant was, if you want to serve God, you have to let go of your cherished notions and trust that God is more. Because you can be tempted by your faith to walk away from the path of Christ.

We see a similar temptation in Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul is a smart, faithful man, but he is often misunderstood, no more so when he writes: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Tempting to think that's it, right? Just believe it and say it. Well, technically, you may not even need to do that to be saved, if saved means to live eternally in God's love. Jesus says we simply are loved.

But when we read these words, we are tempted to think that we don't have to do anything else to be a follower of Christ. Just believe and say the words. Let's just remember that in the gospels, at least one demon publicly professed Jesus to be the Son of God - and it's clear that he believed it.

Let's also remember that this belief in just confessing the faith led many missionaries to force others to get baptized and say the words. Belief is important, speaking is important, but it's only a small piece of the puzzle of Christ.

Then there's Jesus himself. When he is baptized, he's led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.

What are those temptations?

To turn stones to bread. To rule the world. To become invincible.

In other words, Jesus is tempted with different ways to fulfill his God-given mission. Is he here to feed the hungry? Is he here to be a strong leader (maybe to conquer the occupying Roman army?). Is he here to make the world safe?

Just as confessing Christ as Lord and savior is by itself a good thing, so can be feeding the hungry, providing strong leadership and making the world a safer place. And certainly, over the course of his ministry, Jesus DID feed, lead and bring people to physical safety.

But that's NOT what he was here for - nor is it what we are here for.

The temptation of all these good things that SEEM to be acts of faith is that we may grab onto them and forget what we are truly called to do.

We can easily fall into the trap of thinking that doing outreach is enough (whether it be food pantry, garden, reading...).

We can easily fall into the trap of thinking that going to church and singing God's praises (or making your pledge!) is enough.

We can easily fall into the trap of thinking that making the church a safe haven, or protesting injustice is all there is to being a Christian.

They are all good, but what Jesus came here for is much more. What Jesus calls us to is much more.

He came to change our relationship with God - which necessarily means changing our entire orientation from this world to God. He came to change what we are looking at. Because you can't truly follow where you're not looking, and following is what we are called to do.

When I say we are tempted by faith, then, what I mean is that there are many good things out there that fall under the category of faith. They are good in and of themselves - just like chanting and organ music are good - but if they become our purpose, our sole focus, then they lead us from our true purpose of following Christ. Wherever he leads. So this Lent, set your gaze upon Christ. Follow wherever he leads. You might find yourself serving in a pantry or choir - but don't be tempted to stop there. Where Christ leads is a much bigger world. Amen.