I spent Thursday and Friday traveling around LA with a pastor in the underground church in REDACTED COUNTRY NAME and his wife. As you might have seen in the news recently, they have had more church persecution lately in REDACTED COUNTRY than they have had in the last twenty years. Their churches are small and young to begin with, filled with people who have no background in the Bible or Christianity. They don’t have much money. It’s hard and he thinks about quitting. What do you say to someone in that situation? Today’s reading might help someone like him. Whether he continues to be a pastor or not, it’s important that he remember who he’s serving. He’s not serving the foreign missionaries. He’s not serving his congregation. First and foremost, he’s serving Jesus. And he’s not just running a church. He’s participating in a spiritual war, in war in which the outcome is already decided. And the same goes for you and me.

We left off on Christmas day with the boy Jesus in the temple, telling Mary and Joseph that he had to be in his father’s house. Then last week we saw John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance for all the people. And now, in the middle of John’s Baptism, Jesus comes:

**Reading A: Luke 3: 21-23a, 4: 1-13**

**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.**

Why was Jesus baptized? Everyone else was coming to have their sins forgiven. Jesus had no sin. He was not baptized for his own sake, but for ours. This event was the announcement of Jesus’ ministry. There could be no clearer message of who Jesus is and where he came from than what the Father said to him, “You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.” We see the interaction of the persons of the Trinity. The Father speaks, invisibly from heaven. The Son has taken on human form. Even though Jesus was divine, he also took on human flesh and humbled himself. He did not make use of his divine powers. Instead, he relied on the Holy spirit who came down like a dove. He was about 30 years old and this marked the start of his ministry. Ministry is one of those words I wish we would translate into regular English. It just means “service.” So this was the beginning of Jesus serving us. And what was the first thing we needed him to do?

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.**

How did Jesus serve you, or me, or anyone by going into the desert and being tempted by the devil? Because as we know, he did not just come into this world to teach. He came to give his life in our place. He was the innocent lamb of God. The lambs they offered in the temple for their sins were just a foreshadowing of how Jesus would be the innocent lamb of God whose blood was shed to wash away our sins. But to be that perfect, spotless lamb, he had to live a perfect life on our behalf. If Jesus had not been a regular human, who could be tempted to sin, or if God had kept him from temptation, he could not really be offered in our place, could he? Temptation is something we face constantly. And we fail, again, and again. In order to overcome Satan, Jesus had to succeed where we fail, so that he could offer himself for us.

I admit, these are strange temptations. This whole story is a bit eerie.

**The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”**

Why is that even wrong? If one of you had been starving in the desert, and the police found you and gave you some food, I don’t think I would call it a “temptation” and I wouldn’t say you were sinning if you ate it. So why is this wrong for Jesus?

Really this tells us about Jesus’ ministry. He came to serve. When he took on flesh, he lay aside his divine powers and only picked them up for the benefit of others. He came to completely obey the Father. So if the Holy Spirit led him to the desert and directed him not to eat, he would be okay not eating. I don’t think we need to read anything into this about dieting or fasting and it’s benefits. This is about Jesus obeying God perfectly and only using his powers in harmony with his mission from the Father. So how does he answer:

**Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”**

This is a quotation from Deuteronomy. The message is this: food comes from God. Ultimately it is not the food that gives us life, but God who give us the food. I think a better way to paraphrase this would be, “Man’s life does not simply come from bread, it comes from God.” And so obeying God is more important than eating when the two are in conflict. Jesus did not resist, as hungry as he was. I often can’t say no to a cookie at night when I’m not even hungry. I can’t imagine how hard Jesus must have felt the temptation. But he resisted.

So then the devil tries something else that seems strange to us:

**The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”**

Did the devil really have this to offer? Sort of. The devil does have a lot of power over this world. Many rulers seem to get to where they are with the devil’s help. Think of Hitler and other horrible leaders in history. It’s hard to imagine they could get to power without the devil’s help. Yet, Jesus had more than this. He is God. He sits enthroned on high. This temptation is hard for me to relate to, because I have never been offered this. But again this gets back to what Jesus came to do. He came to give up that authority for a time while he suffered and served us. It must have been tempting to simply take it all up again without going to the cross. But there was no other way to save us. This was not the Father’s will. And so Jesus answered:

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

Satan was not worthy of his worship, and the only way Jesus could worship and serve God was by continuing in his mission. So the devil tried one more thing:

**The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: “ ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”**

This is a strange temptation. IF you are the Son of God? Remember Jesus’ baptism? Of course he was. He didn’t need angels; if he wanted, he could have simply flew up to the top of the temple and back down. But he had laid all that aside. He came to serve God 100%. And so acting this way would have tested God.

**Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”**

**When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.**

We fall to temptation all the time. We give in every day. Even as we struggle and grow in our faith, we’re still going to give in in different ways. When we do, look to Jesus who was tempted in every way, yet without sin. He came to save us only. He was fully committed to God, even in very subtle ways. And he did it to win forgiveness for you and me when we fall to temptation. What a surprising beginning to his ministry. And the next event is even more surprising:

**Reading B: Luke 4: 14-30**

**Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:**

This is quite amazing. He had some success in a town called Capernaum, but now he’s in his home town. A few hundred people would live here. One estimate I saw said 400. Everybody knew everybody. They had seen him since he was a child, and probably many people thought that this weird but likeable kid would make a good preacher. So they listened with interest as he read. And here’s the reading from Isaiah, and he’s going to tell them that whenever the text says “me” it’s talking about him.

**“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”**

And he is now here to preach the good news. He is here to bring the Lord’s favor. He’s the messiah who came to make everything right. That’s a pretty shocking message. Did they respond in shock?

**All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.** So, that’s nice, that’s really quite something, but you know, it might be a little much coming from Joseph’s son. Worse than an outright rejection of the message, they don’t even take him seriously.

**Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’ ” “I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”**

All he had to do was smile and nod, and he could have wrapped things up and gone home without incident. But instead he provokes them. They are rejecting a prophet, and it’s not a surprise, because God’s people have a history of rejecting the prophets. Ouch. Remember, he had grown up with these people. Many of them were his elders. Who did he think he was? This goody two shoes, coming back into town, now he thinks he’s so special? Well, now they’ll show him a thing or two:

**All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.**

This foreshadows how they would later actually kill him. This might seem extreme to us. But there are a few considerations. First, the devil is still out to get him. If the devil can’t get you to give up your faith, maybe he’ll find some person attack you and hate you. This was not totally rational on their part. Yet, what Jesus said, even though it was true, was insulting. And nothing hurts so bad as the truth. Our own sinful natures can flare up in fury when we are confronted with our own sin and failure. May God lead us to respond in humble repentance to the news that Jesus came to bring us God favor.

**Reading C: Luke 4: 31-37**

We come to the third event of Jesus’ ministry, and it’s just as surprising as the previous two.

**Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.**

I think, by the way, this is something that continues to catch people’s attention even today. The message of Jesus is the same today as it was back then, and it claims absolute authority over you, me, and everyone. There’s not hemming and hawing with Jesus or his gospel. When you share the gospel, you can be confident too. You don’t need to knock people over, rhetorically speaking, but you can be clear and decisive because the message is true and the authority comes from God. But now there was a chance to see if Jesus could back up that authoritative message:

**In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit.**

For today, I’m going to just assume you have some idea of what this means. I’ll spend more time in a later sermon talking about the details. But demon possession is real. They didn’t see it every day just like we don’t either, thank God, but it was around then and it’s around now. Stay away from it! And what do you expect from such a person? He would probably tell everyone not to listen to Jesus. Instead we hear:

**He cried out at the top of his voice, “Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”** This was bad press. It would embarrass Jesus and confuse his audience. So:

**“Be quiet!” Jesus said sternly. “Come out of him!” Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. All the people were amazed and said to each other, “What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!” And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area.**

As it well should have. The power and authority Jesus held were amazing.

We’ve covered a lot of ground, but I hope that it’s given us a fuller picture of who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what his ministry was like than we could get by focusing on only one aspect.

Jesus was (and is) the Son of God as testified at his baptism, but his own family couldn’t see it. His humble humanity blinded his hometown. His audiences recognized his authority and power but still did not grasp the scope of his work. Yet we saw it. God the Father testified to it. Jesus was here not just to be a regular human teacher. He was here to do something in the spiritual realm. But the devil saw it, the evil spirits saw it. Jesus was here to defeat them on behalf of humanity. He came to free us from bondage to the devil, who does rule this current world. To free us from the sin that the devil led us to do, the death that he brought to this world. He came to open our blind eyes to the spiritual realities all around us, lurking behind every temptation, and bring us the spirit, making us children of God by adoption, just as he is by nature.

And of course he did. If there’s one less to take away from the chapter as a whole, it’s this. Pay attention to the spiritual reality that God is opening your eyes to in this gospel. We’re in the midst of a spiritual battle. And in once sense, Jesus has already won. He’s defeated Satan. On the other hand, we still face temptation every day. The holy Spirit Jesus gave us is real. The evil, satanic nature of the temptations we face is very real. I hope my friends in China can keep that eternal, spiritual perspective as they face earthly persecution. I hope you and I can keep that perspective every day too, because as we do it will lead us to rely on God’s power, not our own, and put our hope in his victory, not our own strength.

**Announcements:**

**Men’s thing**

**HOCKEY game!!!**

**Anything else?**

**School starting?**