



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

There is no mystery in the fact that the church is going through a reformation, a fundamental change. You can see it in the patterns of believing and belonging in the attendance, the way certain smaller churches are disappearing and other churches are going through difficulties. The church is going through a reformation, a change. And this is undeniable. It's something that we ignore at our peril.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we know it or not, things are changing for us.

And it doesn't matter how well resourced you are or how powerful you think your faith is or what you think is going on, there's nothing we can do that can escape that crucible that we're going through as a faith. And this is an undeniable fact, you see it in everything we would say about God and about Jesus, about the Christian life. This is an undeniable fact. The church is like a crustacean or crab that is starting to break free of its outer shell. And the living creature who has no use for that shell is going to climb out and hide for a bit and be soft and vulnerable until that shell grows back. And that new living thing can be somewhat larger than it was ever before.

The church is going through a reformation, not merely a change in the casing of everything, but a time in which we are driven back to the very beginning of what we want to say about God and about Jesus, and about the Holy Spirit and the Christian life. Now, all of what I've just said to you was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr for the faith in 1944. In fact, he added a couple of words. He said to try to engage in any elaborate acts of self preservation is futile. All that we can do as Christians is dedicate ourselves to prayer and righteous action. Bonhoeffer was about a half century or maybe a century too early, but certainly his words ring true today.

And one of the most beautiful things about this process of reformation is it allows us not only to engage in prayer and righteous action, but it also gives us an invitation to be absolutely crystal clear about what is the gospel. And all of that is bound up, I want to suggest to you, in our reading today from the Gospel of Mark. Because one of the things that we have to be really clear about is what it means to live the Christian life with authenticity. And one of the things that makes

the Christian life powerful is we have a different answer to the question of temptation.

What is temptation? Our gospel tells us that Jesus was tempted and that should cause us to think about things differently, about our own temptations and how we define them and about what it means that Jesus was tempted. Because if Jesus, the Son of God, was tempted, then there is something that is powerful about the experience of temptation. There is something that we need to all see as part of our transformation as Christians, and we have to come up with an answer that goes with the grain of the gospel of Jesus.

For too long, the church has answered the question of temptation by pointing to things that most people were least likely to do. Pointing their fingers and then saying, aren't we glad we're not them? Or, we've created these moral superheroes that have defeated temptation and have somehow guided us in our own walk in life. In contemporary art and also classical art, it was customary to actually paint the image of St. Anthony the Great, a third century saint who was known for his ability to defeat temptation and the devil.

Anthony was born in Egypt and he moved into the wilderness, and he shut himself up as a hermit, one of the first people to actually pull within as a Christian. And he had people come to see him and ask questions as to how to defeat temptation in their lives. And you can find in all of classical and contemporary art, images of St. Anthony. But the one that caught my mind is the one on your bulletin, which is from 1934. Oscar Jespers does it. It's a stone statue where Anthony is reclining, not very comfortably, and exalting in his victory over temptation.

And one of the things that Jespers wants us to see in this piece of art that he's created is that we have a tendency as Christians to follow people who their power, their struggle over temptation is a done deal, is something that they've always already done, and so in the process we make a living being into stone. And so the St. Anthony that is shared with us so often by our tradition is of someone who never had a struggle but only a success. What is temptation? How can our temptations be something that Christ is able to redeem and hallow through the gospel? That is the question that you and I have to struggle with this Lent.

A few years ago when I was in New York City in the late nineties – I guess it's more than a few years ago. I was teaching a class to adult confirmands, and one person who was an adult who was being baptized, his name was Ira, and he wore these incredible power suits. He looked like Gordon Gekko. And then everybody else in the class looked like these denizens of Greenwich Village back when Greenwich Village was Greenwich Village. You know what I'm saying, those of you who know. And we were all sitting there and I decided to get interactive. I was, you know, 30 years old. What am I going to tell these people about sin?

And so I said, well, what is sin? And someone raised their hand and said, sex. And I turned around and I wrote it on the whiteboard. Excellent. Get some interaction. What else? Drugs. And I turned around and I wrote it up on the whiteboard. I said, what else? And someone said, rock and roll. And I turned and I wrote up on the whiteboard. But then Ira was sitting in the back with his arms folded and I was getting nervous. So I called on him and I said, Ira, what do you think? He said, none of those things are sin to me. None of those things are evil in themselves. There's nothing wrong with rock and roll. There's nothing wrong with sex. There's nothing wrong with drugs. It's when those things become a God that they have power over you. And I'm tired of letting those things be a God to me, and that's why I want to be baptized.

This was one of the most beautiful definitions of sin and temptation I've heard in all my years of ministry. What is temptation? I think it's more than just the obvious things that you and I would come up with. Cinnamon buns, things like that. Earthly things. Too much chocolate. The things you are really attached to. I think that temptation gets at something deeper. When I bought my iPhone, I was told by the person at the Genius Bar, which means of course he is an authority and you have to listen to him because he's a genius. He told me, don't turn off the iPhone ever because you don't want to wear out the button. And I believed him.

And what I didn't realize is this was an elaborate lie that Apple was telling me because they wanted no space between me and everybody else. They wanted my interactions with the world and my community and everybody else to go right through that smartphone, because that way they could capture and channel my attention and make money. Temptation for me is looking at my phone, it's falling into something that stands between me and another person. And I think if I were to give one word about what temptation means in today's gospel, it's whatever strong drive that you have or desire that you have that causes you to betray your relationship with God and to betray your fidelity to yourself.

See, today's gospel has a different teaching about temptation than we perhaps get in the other gospels where Jesus is having this long dialogue with the Devil. In these other gospels is Jesus in a kind of reprise of Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* in which there's a chess game between the Saint and Satan. But in today's gospel, Mark hardly talks about what Jesus was tempted by. Mark just talks about Jesus moving right in right after He's baptized. Driven by the same spirit that reveals to Him that He is beloved, He's driven into the wilderness where He's tempted by Satan. He has wild beasts around Him and angels. I'm not sure if the wild beasts are there to comfort Him, like you know, Bambi or Cinderella or maybe more like something that could threaten him. And then He emerges, calling for repentance.

And the key that you have to see in that passage is that what happens in that description of temptation is left undefined because we don't know the exact

shape of Jesus' temptations. What we do know is that his temptations were more than anything that got revealed in the scriptures. We know that he took on temptation because Jesus loved our humanity enough to be fully human, and He hallowed that space of temptation with His presence. And that is a lesson to us about our temptations. Our temptations are the stuff of our learning to find our way back to God. Don't waste a moment when you are being drawn by something powerful in your life, to not learn something constructive from it. Don't waste that opportunity for revelation and transformation.

Years ago, when I did the Ignatian exercises, one of the things they would have you do is you'd have to confess your sins, but you'd also have to name the grace that you are seeking and the grace that is found in that sin. The thing you wanted when you followed that temptation and the grace of that temptation itself, the way that temptation was teaching you something powerful about your relationship with God and your relationship with yourself.

The other thing I want you to see in today's gospel is that everything comes from the same spirit who says to Jesus, you are the beloved. Everything that we experience in temptation comes out of that deep fidelity of God to humanity, of Jesus to you because through the Christian faith, the good news of the gospel is that you and I have the same title, beloved, as Jesus has. That everything that has been given to the Father, so we receive, we read in the Gospel of John. Everything that has been given to the Son has been given to us in terms of us being beloved.

You and I can claim the title of being beloved, and this is important when it comes to temptations because I think one of the things that is a cancer to our spiritual lives is the shame we feel because we are drawn powerfully one way or the other. And in fact, the whole shape of the gospel is the opposite direction that you would see in the revelation of your temptations, your own sense of failure and flaws, your own sense of fragility, and that you would be able to see another and offer them love because God loves you.

So see, in our reading from Mark, a teaching of temptation for our time, to name whatever is getting in the way of your relationship with God. Whether it is the temptation to work without ceasing, and so as to prove yourself to others, or whatever shape it takes in your life and see that as enveloped by God's incredible grace. And to create some space for yourself where you can allow that temptation to be hallowed so that your relationship with God becomes the center of your identity and everything else in this universe.

Robert Louis Stevenson, he is known best from the 19th century where he wrote the wonderful novel, the Curious Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He also wrote Treasure Island. He was considered one of the best writers of the late 19th and

early 20th century. And I thought of him on temptation because when I speak of the church going through reformation, I don't mean that everything will be discarded. I mean rather that everything will be transformed by the grace of God. And he writes a beautiful poem called My Kingdom, which is about temptation, and it goes with the grain of everything I'm trying to get you to see today. And so I close with it. It's a prayer.

My Kingdom

A little kingdom I possess
where thoughts and feelings dwell,
And very hard I find the task
of governing it well;
For passion tempts and troubles me,
A wayward will misleads,
And selfishness its shadow casts
On all my words and deeds.

How can I learn to rule myself,
to be the child I should,
Honest and brave, nor ever tire
Of trying to be good?
How can I keep a sunny soul
To shine along life's way?
How can I tune my little heart
To sweetly sing all day?

Dear Father, help me with the love
that casteth out my fear;
Teach me to lean on thee, and feel
That thou art very near,
That no temptation is unseen
No childish grief too small,
Since thou, with patience infinite,
Doth soothe and comfort all.

I do not ask for any crown
But that which all may win
Nor seek to conquer any world
Except the one within.

Be thou my guide until I find,
Led by a tender hand,

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Thy happy kingdom in myself
And dare to take command.

This Lent, follow Jesus as he goes into the wilderness. Befriend the process of temptation and grace. Befriend the wild beast. Lean upon the angels and find your way back to God.

Amen.