

“WHEN PUSH CAME TO SHOVE”

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2017

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

We are beggars. This is true.

Today and on the next five Sundays, I propose to learn how to beg from experts. We will begin with Jesus.

Now, it does not say anywhere in the text that Jesus is a beggar. I’ve never looked at this text in this way. But look again.

He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

And the tempter came.

So you see, the stage is set. What do we expect to see? We expect Jesus to beg. He is hungry, he is by himself, he is starving, famished. Someone comes along. What should he do? Beg.

But he does not.

Back up for just a moment.

Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness, where there is nothing? Where Jesus would have nothing? For a long time?

For him to be tempted. Tested. Tried.

And what was the test?

To see how strong he was?

No.

To see whether he had good survival skills?

No.

It was to see whether, when push came to shove, he feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things. To see whether the great commandment was written in

his heart. To see whether he would cave in and let something else or someone else become his God, when push came to shove. To see whether Jesus, the Son of God, really looked to God for every good thing, or not.

So Jesus was put in the position of one who, having nothing, needed everything.

And the tempter came and challenged him. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.”

The tempter tried the same trick with Eve and Adam, and they fell for it. The message back then was, “If you gain the knowledge of good and evil you won’t need God. You won’t be depending upon God all the time. You can do without God.” They liked the idea, and it made quite a mess.

This time, the message was only slightly different. “If you are the Son of God, why not do your Father’s own thing of creation. You won’t need your Father any more. You will be on your own. You won’t be like a beggar all the time.”

But Jesus did not fall for it. Jesus kept the first commandment, the great commandment. He remained in the position of the dependent, the Son, the one who depended upon and obeyed his Father. He passed the test that Eve and Adam had failed, and everyone since.

There were two more tests, but they had the same theme. Jesus, Son of God, instead of depending upon God why not challenge God, put God to the test, by putting yourself in harm’s way so he has no choice but to save you! Jesus refused.

Again: "Jesus, why don't you take over? I will give you all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus refused.

Through all these challenges Jesus was unmoved. He remained in the wilderness. He stood there, as it were, with his hands empty and open to his Father, like the hands in all these photos, and simply depended upon the God from whom all good things come.

Jesus refused to do the Prodigal Son thing, ask for what was due him, take his share and run away with it. I never saw this connection before, but now I see that Jesus stands in sharp contrast to both of the sons in that parable, because he remains at home and loves and trusts his father without fail.

Picture Jesus in the wilderness, famished, his hands open to the heavens, perhaps even looking up expectantly, trusting that the Father who gave him life would not abandon him. The tempter disappeared, and God the giver filled the hands of the begging Jesus. To wit: "Suddenly angels came and waited on him."

Let me recap this "begging" scenario.

Jesus was reduced to being a beggar. He had the powers not to have to beg. But he insisted on living within the first commandment, allowing God to be God, the giver, the bestower of gifts. So Jesus sat patiently and waited until the Father in heaven gave him what he needed.

Jesus thus models begging for us. To be good beggars, we need to be like Jesus and "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," and expect that "all these things will be added unto" us. God will take care of us, if we will look to him. Psalm 145:15: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season."

True religion begins with this: Believing that (what James says in 1:17) "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down

from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

It takes a lot more than this to be a good beggar, but it begins with this: knowing which side the true bread is buttered on. "All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee," goes the old hymn. When push comes to shove, do we believe this simple fact?

My interpretation of this gospel has not done much to help us yet. I have only raised the bar. I have reminded you to remember always and in everything that you are a debtor to God, who has filled your blank existence with good things. I have been like the Scribes and Pharisees, perhaps, who bind heavy burdens on people, too heavy to carry, and do not lift a finger to help them."

So let me remind you that Lent always points forward to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He did not only come to earth to serve as a reproachful model of moral and religious perfection. He did not come to bind heavy burdens on us, to require us to do more and try harder.

He came to put something in our hands. Our empty hands. I will only hint at it, and trust that you will hold onto it. It is hinted at in this text, in Jesus' first response to the tempter:

One does not live by bread alone, by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Jesus is himself the Word that comes from the mouth of God, and it is a gracious, life-giving word. To people who have forgotten God, Jesus calls "come back." He shines a light in the darkness, and he promises to bring us to God even if he has to carry us on his back. What he begs God for is . . . us. Our lives, our life, our peace. He begs for this from his Father, and the Father gives it to him.

We are what the heavenly Father puts in the empty hands of his Son. Think about that. Amen.