

February 21, 2010 Sermon

Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Deuteronomy 26:1-11

The Ultimate Reality Show

The local sheriff was looking for a deputy, and one of the applicants was called in for an interview. “Okay,” began the sheriff, “What is 1 and 1?”

“Eleven,” was the reply.

The sheriff thought to himself, “That’s not what I meant, but he’s right.” Then the sheriff asked, “What two days of the week start with the letter ‘T’?”

“Today and tomorrow,” replied the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised over the answer, one that he had never thought of himself.

“Now listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?” asked the sheriff.

The job seeker seemed a little surprised, then thought really hard for a minute and finally admitted, “I don’t know.”

The sheriff replied, “Well, why don’t you go home and work on that one for awhile?” The applicant left and wandered over to his pals who were waiting to hear the results of the interview.

He greeted them with a cheery smile, “The job is mine! The interview went great! First day on the job and I’m already working on a murder case!” (e.sermons.com)

In the gospel reading for this Lenten service, you could say that it is Jesus’ first day “on the job” on the road to the wilderness. What does he face in his “first case”? Immediately, he is confronted with three major temptations. And the question is what will he do? As I thought about this question, I thought about it from within our age of reality TV – would Jesus be the ultimate survivor?

No matter what television station you turn to, they are there. Reality TV – The Biggest Loser, The Amazing Race, American Idol, The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Survivor, The Mole. The list goes on and on. All of the reality shows have something in common; the participants must face a number of temptations. It could be the lure of a million dollars or of being the final winner. Those temptations lead to others – lying, cheating and stealing. Or it could be a temptation to do something nice for another participant in order to better their own chances. The temptation doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad action, but it is not for the recipient – it is only for the purpose of winning.

On one series of Survivor, one participant, Lil, wanted to represent the Boy Scouts of America by wearing her uniform on the show. Would she really be able to maintain honor and respect during her entire time on the island? By the end of the show, she says that if she was to do it over, she would have left the uniform behind b/c it was easier to abandon the honor code in order to play the game. Because she wore the uniform, other participants expected her to act a certain way.

What other temptations do reality show participants come up against? As the commercial for a former show stated (Forever Eden), the one part of nature that they have no control over (cue the scary music) is human nature. The temptations that are a part of who we are – our sinful selves – the temptations that we know we shouldn’t indulge in, and yet we do. These are the temptations that reality show participants fall into right in front of a viewing audience all around the world. How would you do if you were to

journey into the wilderness of one of these shows? Would you indulge or break down into temptation so that you could be the sole survivor – at any cost. I am a bit obsessed with the show *The Amazing Race* and would like to be on it to race. But, I would have to find someone other than my husband. He said that he doesn't want to do a race like that with me on television because he's afraid of how we might act together in the midst of competition when we can't maintain our cool.

Do you think that reality TV would buzz over the story of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days without food? Participants on the show *Survivor* complain about food as soon as they get to their camps – and they even get to eat something! Jesus ate nothing. Could Jesus be the ultimate survivor and at what cost would that title hold for him? For you? On the road in the wilderness, he is faced with no one, but three MAJOR temptations. I mean, what a great show it would make – he actually comes face to face with the tempter. Most times, temptation is a bit more subtle, a bit more glamorous and beautiful. Can you imagine the ratings? The show might even surpass that of other reality shows like *American Idol* or the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. How would the temptations that Jesus faced play out?

Temptation One: Stone into Bread – This is the temptation to use power for the wrong purposes. Rupert became a fan favorite *Survivor* show character. He didn't win on his first show, so he made a run for it a couple of other times, including “*The Survivor All-Stars*.” He has power, specifically in his ability to catch fish. It shows his usefulness for the group. They wouldn't want to get rid of him because they want to eat. So, in a way, it's done for the betterment of the group, and yet it is a selfish reason. He can decide whether or not he catches fish for the whole group or for himself. Or, he could choose not to catch any fish at all. In his case, he chooses to use his ability to his advantage and his rating as a survivor participant is high. In the case of Jesus, the tempter arrives on the scene when Jesus is hungry and he has an idea of how to get food. “Look, Jesus, you gotta' eat some time. I mean, I know that you like to eat. I can even picture you eating with people that others wouldn't be caught dead eating with. And just think what your turning stone into bread could do for people! Not only would they believe in you more, but also you could be feeding them. Just listen to my voice, my words, and my idea.” Jesus does not give in to the temptation. Of course he knows that good could come from it, but the important thing is whose voice he listens to, the words of the tempter or the Word of God. He quotes Scripture -- “One cannot live by bread alone.” I choose to live on the Word of God is what Jesus is proclaiming.

Temptation Two: Jump on the Rocks – This is the temptation to gain popularity by performance. In the words of reality TV's *Survivor* show, this is a big temptation. Each participant, no matter who they are, wants to perform really well on the challenges during the game. Not only do they want to prove to the others that they are stronger and smarter, but to win the challenge is to receive immunity – you win, you stay another day, no matter what anyone thinks of you or your abilities. No one can vote you off that day. “If you prove that you are worthy, you can stay.” The tempter takes Jesus to the holy city, to the highest point of the temple and gives him a challenge. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down b/c it is written that the angels will come and lift you up and you won't even stub a toe. Come on Jesus, your performance could make you pretty

popular.” But Jesus is not tempted by this kind of popularity. He’s not some traveling magician who works with the slight of hand. “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” I choose to live on the Word of God is what Jesus is proclaiming.

Temptation Three: Serve the Wrong Master – This is the temptation to idolatry – the first commandment. Of course, the survivor participant that comes to mind is none other than Johnny Fairplay. He is the character that everybody loves to hate. For him, the temptation is the idolatry of money and his ability to lie; he even pretends that his grandmother dies during the filing of the show in order to gain sympathy from his group. He will do anything to win. After the show, other participants actually say that they wish they had thought of it – he really knew how to “play the game.” Johnny Fairplay was ready to lie, cheat and steal his way to the final show – it wasn’t an issue of temptation for him, it was only about winning. In the third temptation for Jesus, the devil takes him to the highest mountain and shows him the entire splendor of the kingdoms of the world. “Hey, Jesus! I can give you all of this if you just do one little thing – bow down and worship me.” Jesus yells, “away from me! It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” The only one Jesus will bow down and worship is God. For the third time, Jesus chooses to live on the Word of God no matter what is offered to him.

Jesus faced real temptations, just as you and I do. However, whereas we may stumble over and into temptations, like participants on the reality show Survivor, Jesus withstood the temptations of the devil on the road in the wilderness.

In the world of reality TV, the fact that Jesus didn’t chose to succumb to three major temptations actually might not make for the best show. We must admit that it is more fun to watch when participants make mistakes, they have conflict and they make the wrong choices. Jesus may never be asked to be a part of Survivor All-Stars b/c he wouldn’t “play the game” in order to win. Jesus lives in order to lose his life because it is the only way that you and I gain life. Jesus is the ultimate survivor of the ultimate reality – the reality of the long road to the cross. It is a road filled with true temptation and suffering. But it is also a road filled with love and forgiveness. Because Jesus loses his life for you and me, becoming the ultimate survivor takes on a whole new meaning – you receive the ultimate gift; you are given eternal life.