

Luke 4:1-14

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

Non-Canonical Reading--Harold Kushner, *Conquering Fear*

"Old is Not a Four Letter Word"

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Let's begin with that story, the story you know we've heard before. I don't know if it's true. I know it's truth. I think it's a metaphor. Jesus in the wilderness, forty days in the wilderness, and the devil said to Jesus, "You can do magic, turn the stones into bread," and the devil said, "You could have power, the world could be yours," and the devil said, "Climb up to the top and jump, you could be bishop or pastor of First Church." And Jesus said, this is from the Greek translation, "Don't play games with God." It's not really from the Greek translation, it's what he might have said.

This story is a serious one, in fact, I think it's too serious to be taken literally. I take it metaphorically. It is a metaphor that applies to all of us. It is a metaphor of how temptation comes to us from time to time to be cared for. A metaphor for the temptation that comes when we are inclined to live a life of ease. Temptation to be rich, but not understand the meaning of our wealth. Temptation to acquire power, but not be able to see it in its use for the benefit of people. Temptation to give up in the face of the strong message that says we really don't count. Temptation to act our age, which is to accept our age as a burden, not a benefit. It's a metaphor that strikes out at the basic sense that we are what we are told to be, aging, over the hill, elderly, under the spell of something that leaves us addled and unwise.

Sam Keen wrote a book entitled *The Passionate Life: Stages of Loving*. He understands the importance of the wilderness and temptation as he writes, "in the presence of the threat that evil may overwhelm us at any moment, and allow death to establish its grand dominion. The only hopeful path left to us is to throw away our concern about bare survival, and abandon the armored fortress of warrior psyche and accept our vocation as leaders, all of us, and set out on a journey that has no beginning or end. It may be well to discover the promise that comes to human beings only when we dare to become lovers." This morning, old is not a four-letter word, love is. The temptation is, to each of us it's a temptation to exist merely, it's a temptation to survive merely, it's a temptation to yield to a passive live.

Magic stones turn to bread. What happens when the magic stops? Powerful control in the world yields to power that enables us to do incredible things, but what happens when they take away our authority? Prestigious ladder-climbing that leads to the top of the temple or the organization, whatever that might be, what happens when we hit the glass ceiling and there are no more rungs on the ladder nor steps to climb? Magic turns boulders into bread. Power controls the world. Ladders lead somewhere, but age blunts the magic, stifles the power, stops the climb. What do we do when the magic is gone? Old is not a four-letter word, but love is.

Two things I want to say about this. Temptation comes to Jesus, temptation for all of us, there comes a time when we've just got to make a declaration, and what we've just got to stand up and say is, "Get behind me, Satan." There comes a time to make the declaration, and in a sense, we're going to have to feed the ego, because it needs it, and to say, "I am a child of God. I can't survive on bread alone. God only will I serve. I do not allow God to be tempted. I want to live." That's the declaration, "Because I am a child of God." God is love. That's essential to our faith, basic to our Christian religious belief.

Carl Sagan wrote a novel. It became a movie. Both are good. *Contact*. In that movie there's this person who says, "I had an experience I cannot prove. I can't even explain it. But everything I know as a human being, everything that I am, tells me it was real. I was part of something wonderful, something that changed me forever, a vision of the universe that tells me undeniably how tiny and insignificant and how precious we all are. A vision tells us we belong to something that is greater than ourselves. We are not, none of us, alone." And that doesn't end with age. It expands. It deepens with age, because old is not a four-letter word. Love is.

Ossie Davis said, "Age is that point of elevation from which it is easier to see who we are. Age makes knowledge, tempers knowledge with experience, and out of that comes the possibility of wisdom." That's what you said. You're right. A declaration. I am a child of God. Feed the ego. Every now and then we've got to. Get behind me, get behind me, Satan, I will not react to your temptation. I will not let you tell me I am less than a child of God. I will not take from life what I can get. I will give to life my best, at every age, at every stage. A declaration. I want to live, not be served. I want to live, not be given to.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "This desire to live is accompanied by the power of God to assist. God is love." And then she said, "I believe God is not in the business of granting wishes, but God is in the business of raising the dead, not all of whom are willing." Soren Kierkegaard said, "We have an opportunity every day of our lives." He thinks if we finish with life before life has finished with us, we have not finished. A declaration. Those pictures in Egypt, they're frightening. Streets full of people and chaos. But every time I see reports like that, and we see it from time to time, of people rising up, and we can only hope that that will lead to something better for those people. And it may.

I think of Boris Yeltsin, and the day he stood firm, and the fall of communism and the former Soviet Union. I remember that day, and those pictures. And someone asked him, "Where did you get the inspiration to do that?" and he said "There was this electrician in Poland. His name was Lech Walesa, he's the one who started it all. Someone asked Lech Walesa in Poland where he found the courage to stand up and speak out like he did. He said, there was the civil rights movement in the United States, and Martin Luther King. Someone asked Martin Luther King what gave him the idea and the inspiration to leave his pulpit and stand up for people, and he said, "This was this house cleaner, Rosa Parks. One day she was too tired to sit in the back of the bus, where black people are supposed to sit." In the wilderness she made a declaration, "I want to live, I am a child of God" Feed the ego. Old is not a four-letter word, love is, and love can change the world.

Basketball season is heating up. CSU men gave BYU all they wanted, and then they went and beat the Air Force, and last night they beat Utah. Go Rams. I hesitate to continue, because this time of year, I think of the basketball coach in North Carolina, but not Duke this time, North Carolina State, Jimmy Valvano, when he was dying of cancer. He made a speech. It was his declaration. This is part of what he said. "I fight a different battle, you see. I have trouble walking. I have trouble standing for long periods of time. Cancer has taken away a lot of my physical ability, cancer is attacking and destroying my body. But what cancer cannot touch is my mind, my heart, my soul. I have faith in God. I have hope that things may get better for me, but even if they don't, I promise you this, I will never give up. I will never give up." And then he pointed to the 1983 national championship basketball team. They were sitting there in the room where he spoke. "I learned a great lesson from these guys. They amaze me. They did things I wasn't sure they could do, because they absolutely refused to give up. That was the theme of our championship season, " he said. "Never give up. And that's the lesson I learned from them, and that's the message I leave with you. Never give up. Never give up."

A declaration. I am a child of God. It says, "I want to live. I want to live until I die. Get thee behind me, Satan. I want to act on life, not react to things. Because this is my chance to discover what I've got, and what I can become. Because I have a puzzle to solve, and it's called Life, and I bring a piece to the puzzle. I want to live."

Harold Kushner, in his book *Conquering Fear*, identified aging as one of the primary fears in life. "Many old people have seen remarkable things, and have done remarkable things, and have learned important lessons in their lives. Unless we're planning to die young, we do ourselves a disservice when we hold old age a something to be feared."

George Bernard Shaw said, "Life is no brief candle, it's a splendid torch. We want to make it burn brightly."

He died this week, Jack LaLanne, age 96. Weight-lifter, nutrition advocate, some people thought he was nuts. When he was 70, on his 70th birthday, he towed 70 boats. Each of those boats had a person, so he towed 70 people, 70 boats, swimming a mile, shackled and handcuffed. Once he said, often he said, "I can't die. It would destroy my image." I want to live, feed the ego. I don't want to be waited on. The declaration that the wilderness, I'm a child of God. Old is not a four-letter word. Love is.

Secondly, there comes a time to leave the wilderness. Because if we never leave the wilderness, we will remain encumbered by our desire to leave it. Beyond the wilderness, there is a wildness in the world. I want to live. I am a child of God, the declaration. I want to live weird. God is doing a new thing. God is doing a new thing, and we've got to act on it. God is doing a new thing in us, and we have a chance, because what we've never been, and grow into, could become the fullness of ourselves. We want to live, heed the spirit. True to the best that is in us. Old is not a four-letter word. Love is.

Gail Sheehy wrote, "The source of continuing aliveness is to find your passion and then pursue it with whole heart and single mind." And then she said, "There comes a time when we stop feeding the ego and start heeding the spirit." Interesting to note that Jesus left the wilderness and the confrontation with temptation in the story, and he went to his own home town where he preached a sermon and it didn't go well. Doesn't mean it was wrong. But he started doing a new thing. He left the wilderness, but he didn't leave the wildness, and some would say, and some did, he got weird. He engaged in what some call a dereliction. He was a derelict. Now, if you look that up, it simply means a person abandoned. Somebody just a little "off," who does the unexpected. And God did a new thing in him.

John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal bishop, now retired, wrote an autobiography. The title is *Here I Stand*. Tells the story, when he was a pastor, appointed to a church in Richmond, Virginia, and his first encounter with that congregation, 300 people showed up to meet him and to hear him speak. "Throughout that talk, I watched the faces of the people in the congregation, and there was no doubt, I had everyone's attention except this one woman. I guessed her to be in her mid-seventies, sitting in the front row. She scowled at me and she shook her head at me through the entire presentation. She was elegant and well-appointed, dressed in black with her gray hair pulled tightly into a bun behind her head. I can see her now. She sat straight as a ramrod and austere. There was an air about her. I looked at her a number of times during the talk, and she was sitting right in front, hard to miss her. I marveled at the muscle control it took to keep that scowl in place for so long. After the presentation, people began to leave, and I immediately stepped down to confront this unresponsive, negative person in the first row. I stuck out my hand and said, 'I'm Jack Spong. Who are you?' She said, 'I'm Helen Adams.' I later learned she had been the bane of every pastor's existence in that church. She was critical of everybody, but she was in church every Sunday, and she disagreed and disapproved of everything, and he said, "I don't know if I was inspired by the devil or the Holy Spirit, but

I said to her, 'Well, you'd be a hell of a lot more attractive if you smiled once in a while.' (Gosh, I would never say that to somebody. I've wanted to...) 'When I saw her the next Sunday, she smiled. It was like an iceberg had been melted around her, and she became one of the most helpful people in the entire church.' God did a new thing in her. Helen Adams learned to do the unexpected, and her spirit grew, and her horizons were expanded. In her and through her, God was doing a new thing.

Dereliction. I want to live, not like I've lived, I want to live in a new way, just a little off, just a bit unexpected. God is doing a new thing in me. Several years ago, a friend of mine suffered a heart attack and had triple bypass surgery, and there were some complications, so he was in the hospital a little longer than he expected. But when he got out, he was 85 years old. He loved cars, and on his way home from the hospital his wife asked if he'd like to drive, and he did, and he got their car out on the highway and he gunned it, and his wife was appalled, because he got it going over a hundred miles an hour. He was telling me this, and he said, "My wife doesn't approve of that, but you know, I just had to do it." Sometimes, you just do. That's the derelict, that's the part of us that says, "I've got to live a little weird, my way. God's doing a new thing in me. Age is not a four-letter word. Love is."

Amy Grant had for years been a writer and singer of Christian music, and one year she stepped outside the box she was in and began writing secular music. Personally, I think her secular music in many ways was more religious than her Christian music, but her critics didn't think so, and they were mean to her. So on one occasion in a concert, Amy Grant took the time to talk about that. She shared the pain over the negative criticism she had received, and her move from Christian music to secular music, and then she said, "Some people think I should stand in the light and give my witness, but I believe God has called me to stand in the dark and there give off my light. I know there is danger in the dark, but God's word told me that it will be all right, as long as I don't lose sight of the light." Leaving the wilderness, living the wildness, dereliction, God doing a new thing in us, living weird.

Some might say, doing the unexpected, heed the spirit, reinventing ourselves, remaking ourselves. I knew a medical doctor who retired from his practice and he got to thinking about his life and how he really never had much of a childhood, so he called up the local elementary school and he volunteered to be in class with those second-grade students so he was with them the whole year. When they moved up to third grade, he stayed with them there. When they moved to fourth grade, all the way up to when he went to middle school, he was there. They called him their friend, they called him Robert. I knew a president of a seminary who got crosswise with some of the trustees of the school, and they fired him, and he began to work trying to help AIDS victims in third-world countries and Don Messer will tell you it's the most interesting time of his life. I knew a bishop who retired, but she thought she wasn't finished with ministry, and so Sharon Rader now teaches seminary students at Garret Evangelical Seminary in Chicago. She considers this one of the most important phases of her work.

When was the last time we took a day off and sat under a tree and listened to the gentle wind? Or when was the last day we spent some time with somebody nobody else would spend any time with, just listening to what they had to say? And when was the last time we picked up a brush to paint a picture, or a brush to paint somebody's house, just because if all we do is what we've done, all we'll get to be is what we've been. If in pursuit of a comfort zone, we do what we think we must, then being chased by our habits we are apt to forget who we were, and we will neglect some aspect of our being, of the person we could become. Dereliction, a little off, a bit weird perhaps, doing it our way, a tad unpredictable, a new thing, God doing a new thing, a passion for life. Heed the spirit at any age. Old is not a four-letter word but love is.

Let me finish with a story I think you've heard before. I never had the courage to tell it here. It's a metaphor. I doubt if it really happened, but it might have. Two men walking through the woods came across a deep hole. It was so deep, they couldn't see the bottom of it, so they started chucking pebbles in there. Couldn't hear any sound, so they picked up bigger rocks, threw them in, couldn't hear a sound. Then they saw a railroad tie. They picked it up and threw it in the hole. Not a sound, the hole was so deep. Suddenly from out of the nearby woods a goat appeared running as fast as its little legs would carry it and raced toward the men, past the men, leaped into the air, jumped into the hole, it was an amazing thing. Then a farmer came by. "Did you boys see a goat around here?" "You be we did. An incredible thing, this goat came running out of the woods and it jumped into the hole." "Wouldn't be my goat, then, no, wouldn't be my goat then, because my goat was chained to a railroad tie." I'll tell you what, if you and I can't cut the ties or the chains that we're tied to, some of us are tied to chains of getting old, if we can't make our declaration that we're a child of God, and if we can't live out our dereliction that God is doing a new thing in us, some day, somebody's going to throw us down a deep hole. We won't get out, it will happen if we forget old is not a four-letter word, but love is, so let's feed the ego if it needs it, and heed the spirit. We are a child of God, who wants to do a new thing in us. Let God do it.