

## Luke 4

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God. How many times have we ever had to say that or chosen to say that when faced with temptation? Ideally, there would never be a situation in which we would need to say such a thing. Realistically, there are many situations where we should not say those words. It would be wrong to reply to someone asking for a meal as they winch with hunger pangs that, "One does not live by bread alone." It is a saying of the psalmist and a teaching of Christ to show us that we live in a world where temptation is always somewhere in our minds and always within hands reach. Our lives are not focused on God Whether temptation is sitting in our refrigerator, whether it is waiting to be streamed onto our computers, a bit of gossip that just has to be shared with a friend, or whether it is just an opportunity to take an easy way out, temptation permeates our lives.

Friends, let me tell you today, Jesus went through all this temptation too. Our gospel story today marks the beginning of our Lenten travel with Christ as we make our way down the road to Jerusalem and the tomb. Jesus is fresh out of the waters of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit has descended like a dove, and we have heard the voice of God say, "You are my Son the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Then, as it seems, before we have a chance to blink, the Holy Spirit is leading Jesus into the wilderness. Leading him to a desolate place to consider just what it

means for him to be the Son of God. Following the history of Israel, and the stories of Moses and Elijah, the identity of Christ's ministry will be found over 40 days in this bleak place. His ministry is one that, powered by the Holy Spirit, turns evil aside, rejoices in the way of the righteous, and is founded on the very word of the Living God. It will be made known that even good things cannot entice Jesus' focus away from God. Perhaps more important for us today, it is made known that to be a follower of Jesus is not to be a follower of a comfortable messiah.

Three great temptations are given that offer new reflections on what it means to be truly tempted. A change in personal and corporate well being, political power, and protection were all things offered by this Satan. We are usually tempted by what we can do, not by what is far beyond our scope of action. These very real temptations that Jesus was faced with were well within his power and ability as the Son of God. But they were opportunities to give evil powers undue control. They were also, however, temptations to rise to unrighteous goodness and control. There are many who would fortune from these persistent persuasions to rise to goodness. Stones turning to bread; the hungry would love that. Possessing all the political power in the world; the oppressed would hope for it. The unguarded protection of God; those who long for a sign of God's power would rejoice in it. I would have to imagine that Christ knew the good that could come out of all these temptations. He also saw that by permitting his ministry to be swayed and coalesced with the forces

of sin would mean the downfall of his ordained ministry, a ministry that is to give hope and reconciliation to the world.

What is the What. A novel that gives the account of a young Sudanese man as he struggles through some of the most horrific acts of violence, warfare, and genocide that have been witnessed on the continent of Africa. Valentino Achak Deng, at the age of just 7, was one of the thousands upon thousands of unaccompanied minors who fled their homes and villages of Southern Sudan to Ethiopia and Kenya in search of refuge from their war between the unjust government of Khartoum and the fierce forces of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army beginning in the early 1980's.

The cryptic title of the book comes from the creation account of the Dinka's, an ethnic group of Sudan. According to this account, God created man and woman, gave them fertile land, and then bestowed upon them God's greatest gift, the cow. Cows would bring man and woman milk, meat, and prosperity, and for that they thanked God for this most perfect gift. Then God said to them, "you can either have the cow as my gift to you, or you can have the What." Man asked, "What is the What?", "I cannot tell you," God replied, "Still, you have to choose." Well, the man and the woman could see this cow standing right in front of them. They knew all the positive ways the cow would influence their lives, and they knew they could live with great contentment. They knew that God gave them the cow as a great gift,

for their health and happiness, and that they would be fools to pass it up for the What.

The creation story continues by explaining that the man and woman made the wise and correct choice. That God was testing them to see if they could take pleasure in what God had given them rather than succumb to the temptation of the unknown. Because the Dinka's chose to accept what God had given to them, they live in prosperity. In parallel to our notion of the Garden of Eden, the Dinka's prosperity was brutally destroyed when sin was released upon the world. For the rest of the book, I was captivated in finding out What is the What? Could the human condition be better apart from the gifts of God? It's a question to which the answer lies only in temptation.

Valentino Deng wrote this book while living as a refugee here in Atlanta. His account is a heart breaking story that speaks to a wider human condition. Sin has broken our world. Humanity is scared, creation is destroyed by the darkness that is sin. Temptation is that initial calling card; the easily spotted, harder to overcome direct connection to our sinfulness. It is a commonality among all humanity.

It's not easy being a sinful person in a sinful world. It's not easy being a follower of Christ. As I read Valentino Deng's story, I agonized over the deep suffering that he endured. Losing his family, his home, his friends, his childhood to violence and warfare aimed at genocide and the control of power. I agonized not

only for Valentino, but for all those who face the same suffering on account of hatred and abuse, imprisonment and discrimination, loneliness and defeat. God! Why can't you fix these things? Why couldn't you turn those stones into bread, take back all the power of the kingdoms of the world, throw yourself off the Temple so everyone could witness your glory? Why couldn't you just do it? Save us from this grief, from our own sinfulness.

If only the way of the cross was that easy. If only we could set down the burden of our sins that weigh so heavily upon us. If only sin and Satan could depart from us, not till an opportune time, but forever. When will the time come where the kingdom of God will be seen and experienced here on earth? When will all humanity be able to cast aside temptation as Christ did and live solely for our creator, redeemer, and sustainer?

It's not easy being a follower of Christ, and if it is, we are doing something wrong. When we hear Christ calling to us to "Come, follow me" our response is often wavered and trembling. We fear giving ourselves up in such a dramatic and life-changing way. We fear that we lack the strength to love unconditionally. We fear that our sins, our temptations, will forever be a detrimental stain in our lives and on our world.

We reflect in this season of Lent that what we know does not last forever. Our possessions, our governments, our priorities, our families, and even our own

earthly lives are not eternal. We stated on Ash Wednesday as we crossed your foreheads, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This Lenten season we try to release our grasp around all those things that we hold dear. From our own securities and presumed notions of how the world works, and allow ourselves to be plunged back into the unknown of our baptismal waters, the same waters that Christ himself passed through. The baptismal waters signify our new beginning and our new life in Christ. We should be terrified of that plunge back into those waters, terrified of our new life in Christ, because that new life begins with this trek to Jerusalem. We are terrified because we know what lies at the end, the death of Christ, the death of ourselves. But friends, the crossing through the baptismal waters and then out onto the shores of temptation is the first step towards our death tomb, it is first of all a step into our womb of life. How can we fear temptation? How can we fear death?

The world that inundates us with temptation is the world that says poverty is just a way of life and food is a scarce resource so somebody will always hunger. It is a world that says power is equal to might and oppression keeps the majority safe. It is a world that begs us to take the easy way out because the less we think the less trouble we can cause. Ultimately, the world that is full of temptation is also the world that tells us that resurrection is not possible. Friends, this season of Lent, know that our sovereign God, the God of grace and resurrection, is the God of this

world that knows our temptation. Through the love of Jesus Christ we can live not in fear of temptation, but in joy of our reconciliation with God, as we live our lives for the glory of God and reconciliation of the world.