

## Sermon Archive 235

Sunday 10 March, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 4: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Out there in the wilderness, within the greater struggle of deciding who we are, how we'll operate, and what the whole thing ultimately is for, there are three verbal skirmishes. In each skirmish, there are two voices - one unholy and one Spirited - giving six acts of speech all up. I want to look at each act of speaking - where it comes from, to what it speaks, what it seeks to do and how it seems to work. We'll take the three unholy voices first, then pause for a wee interlude - a reflection on living within a negative soundscape. Then we'll look at the three Spirited speech acts, finishing with an epilogue on nurturing the voice that is good.

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The first word spoken is "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread". The word is spoken to someone who hasn't eaten for forty days. It's spoken to someone who's hungry. The speaker of the word has worked out where the principal vulnerability is, and has honed in on it.

There are indeed loving responses to hunger. You could, for instance, put some bread into the hungry person's hands - or into an offering basket at church. You could, in the classic parlance of the proverb, teach the hungry person how to catch a fish.

**Or** you could use hunger as a weapon. There's no better way for manipulating someone than to work out where the weakness is - and to play to that. What will the hungry person do for food? What will the lonely person do for company? What will the sick person pay for what you pretend is "treatment"? What will the blackmailed person do for silence? The unholy voice finds the weakness and pokes it, until it gives.

We all have weaknesses. We all have vulnerabilities. We try, I think for the most part, to keep them hidden. If love finds them out, then love will help, will forgive, will try to heal, will bear with us, protect us. If un-love (or fear) finds them out, and weaponising occurs, then that is wilderness.

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The second unholy word spoken is “To you I will give [the glory of the kingdoms of the world], for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please”. Does the phrase “anyone I please” sound a little arrogant? In the second word, we find an attitude of ownership: “I own this. It belongs to me.” In the second word, we also find an attitude of fiat, of arbitrary “tossing away”. I’ll throw some favour at the proletariat if I feel like it. It’s all been given to me.

The truth is that power *is* given to some people. Some people have extraordinary power put into their hands - often through quite legitimate processes. And if the empowered person understands the gravity of their responsibility, then that’s fine. It’s also true, however, that some powerful people fall into the trap of not being humbled by their responsibility. Power becomes for them a right, a personal chattel, a toy to be played with in the presence of disempowered others. These are the despots, the dictators, the payers of minimum wages, the ones around whom eventually the bread basket becomes the desert. “It will all be yours - if you worship me”; it’s power used such that worship is claimed - demanded from the have-nots. Power used for me!

Bribes. Political favours. Diplomatic postings to tropical islands. Hush money. It’s all been given to me, and I’ll give it to you - if I feel like it. Can you make me feel like it? What’s that in your pocket? It’s all about me and my power, and what I want, you know. It’s mine, and you need to fall into line, and worship me - so says the unholy voice in the wilderness.

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The third unholy word takes the struggling, tempted figure to a high place, and tells him to jump. What a vile thing to say! But it gets said. One New Zealand politician text messages another New Zealand politician: “you sweaty, fat, toe inturned mutant. You deserve to die and leave your children in peace and your wife out of torment”. [Source: NZ Herald, 25 January, article by Barry Soper]

Such is the commonness of saying the vile thing that we’ve invented a catch-all online word for it: “trolling” - and the list of trolling victims is sadly long. As is the list of other people who have been brought to destruction through old fashioned face-to-face enticements to self-destruction.

I think it’s easy to over-complicate the third unholy word - turn it into some kind of theological thought-experiment. Part of the thing is about angels coming to the rescue, about being saved in the high risk existential free fall. Part of it’s pitched as a test of faith - what we are prepared to do for faith. Part of it’s pitched as probing the thinking around the tacky neon signs saying “Jesus saves”. But no! The third word, at its most basic, is simply about telling the struggler to jump. And that is

unholy.

Those are the three unholy words. Now for an interlude: living with the unholy words.

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As I have written in the notice “Lent 2019: Wilderness Stories”, many of Israel’s new beginnings or significant faith moments are set in the context of wilderness. Over the Sundays of Lent, we’re going to look at a number of them. **This** wilderness story is about a new beginning. It’s Jesus, immediately after having learned at his baptism that he was the beloved Son of God, working out what that means. How is he to operate as a child of God? How will he work as he extends the love that already has touched him, given him a new identity and task for life? It’s about beginning the journey of faith and service. He does that, sets out on the pilgrimage, having to contend with the unholy voice. We, who also are called into faith and service, who need to work out who we are, and what we will do, also are being formed in the wilderness - the wilderness of the destructive voice that picks on our vulnerabilities and the misused power around us. This story is no theory. It’s human experience. It’s life. It’s our formation. How do we become whom God calls us to be, going through that kind of wilderness?

So to the other voice, the Spirited voice, we go.

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Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” The Spirited voice insists that we are not essentially hungry creatures - though we be hungry. We are creatures who have been fed in all manner of ways. As the wilderness hones in on our vulnerabilities, the Spirit by whom Jesus was led, says “you shall not starve”. *My table thou hast furnished in presence of my foes; my head thou dost with oil anoint and my cup overflows. [Psalm 23:5] Those who drink of the water that I shall give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. [John 4:14] Take, eat, this is my body, given for you. [Luke 22:19] Do this in remembrance of me.*

Be assured - not by bread alone . . .

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Jesus answered him “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” The power-grabbers, the arrogant, the irresponsible say it all belongs to

them, and then demand our worship. They would demean us by having us worship their strutting and fretting. To them we say “no”. Our worship belongs to another - to whom it all, contrary to your claims, really does belong. Neither fawns, nor slaves, nor cringing worshippers we! Serving only God - - in the dignity that God has given!

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Jesus answered him “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” The wilderness says “jump”. We say “we know God, and never will we jump”.

And we are told that, with that, the unholy one departed - for a while.

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An epilogue.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that the unholy one is said to have departed, but only for a while. The wilderness engagement will continue for Jesus - particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he’ll find himself praying through all these sorts of things again. (Poor Jesus!) Wilderness engagement, though not always a daily theme or dynamic in our story, is a recurring challenge - from time to time. And yes, in our world, if we think about it, from time to time we’re brought into contact with our own vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of others. From time to time we need to decide whether we will be people who treat those vulnerabilities in love, or as strategic advantages. And from time to time, we’ll be invited to play the game of the powerful and the arrogant. The bribe. The offer of the tropical island - if we will massage the ego and pretend it’s all about them. Do we play that game, and become slaves, or worship someone ELSE? And from time to time will we join in the trolling, or defend life? Truth and dignity!

We negotiate these things, we work out who we are, now, in the light of the story of Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.

Praying that we too may be Spirit-led, we begin our Lenten journey.

A moment of quiet.

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