

Sermon
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
August 15, 2010

Luke 3:21-22
Luke 4:1-13

Soul Vaccination

Sometimes I just cannot predict what is going to pop into my head. Strange things; seemingly random things. It happened again as I began to prepare this sermon. Some of you know that I like the Revised Common Lectionary, the scripture guide used by many preachers around the world that is geared to the seasons of the church. I'm deviating from the lectionary this morning, however, and using a text that is most commonly preached on or near the beginning of Lent. This story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness has been a longtime favorite of mine. Presented with this wonderful and rich text the possibilities are endless. As I read and studied I thought of different ways I might approach this familiar passage. I considered what God might have me say about wilderness and the wilderness we all face in our lives. I thought about the parallels with the Exodus story and how the specific temptations presented to Jesus were similar to some of the most challenging moments experienced by Moses during his wilderness experience. I started playing around with words, words like test and tempted, authority and kingdom. And then it happened. It popped into my head, the Tower of Power. My mind was drifting toward looking at power in the context of this story, God's power, the devil's power, Jesus' power, and suddenly, before I knew what was happening, it popped into my head and lodged itself firmly in my brain, the Tower of Power. Now, you may think that I am referencing the Bank of America Corporate Center or the Sears Tower or maybe the Empire State Building. Nope. What I thought about that day was the R&B, funk musical group the Tower of Power who, though still active today, had their hey day in the 1970's. As I continued to work on my sermon I couldn't

get the Tower of Power out of my mind. And it got worse. I started to think about some of their hit songs and how some of those song titles actually expressed concepts that could be linked to our text for today. I realized that one of those song titles caused me to think about the temptation story and its connection to Jesus' journey towards the cross in a way that had never occurred to me before. And then, and this is what really did it, I was riding down the road in my car minding my own business when a song by the Tower of Power came on the radio. Well, I may be a bit hard headed at times but I can recognize when I am in control and when I am not. So here I am today to bring you a word from God, and apparently the word God wants you to hear is the Gospel According to the Tower of Power.

(One quick note to put your mind at ease. What I am about to share with you today does not require any knowledge at all of the Tower of Power or their music. If you are familiar with them it may enhance your experience a bit but God's word to you today is not limited or bound by your understanding of 1970's pop culture).

[This Time Its Real \(play CD clip\)](#). That's one of the Tower of Power's hit songs from 1973. It's a catchy, upbeat tune that you can't help but move to. And it also suggests to me a good way to introduce our actors in this melodrama from the book of Luke. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan and his very first action is to go into the wilderness and fast for 40 days. Now this was no ordinary baptism. As Jesus came up from under the water the scripture says the heavens parted and the Holy Spirit, in the bodily form like a dove, came down upon him and God's voice announced, (RC on handheld microphone) ***"This is my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased"***. It was this spirit that descended upon Jesus that then led him into the wilderness to fast and be tested and basically to prepare for the journey to the cross. Now the anticipation and

hope of the people of Israel was high as they continued to struggle under the weight of Roman oppression. A Messiah was anticipated that would rescue them and restore the kingdom of God to its former glory. Many had come before, false messiahs and prophets that promised to be the One. John the Baptist himself was thought to possibly be this savior but he proclaimed that even someone greater than he was coming. And come he did, humbly and quietly until that day in the Jordan when the heavens split open and God burst on to the scene in a way he never had before. The expectations of the Jewish people had been raised before, but this time it's real. It's real because God declared it so that day in the Jordan. It's real because Jesus grapples in the wilderness with a very real adversary, the devil Luke calls him, who has the cunning and guile and ability to derail God's plan for humankind before it even gets started. It's real because Jesus is in a state of weakness having fasted for 40 days and is therefore even more susceptible to Satan's temptations than he might have normally been. And it's real because what the devil used to tempt Jesus weren't unusual, off the wall, crazy things, but very normal, ordinary, human things. Temptations like food, prestige, power and authority. Things that we today would be hard pressed to do without. So yes, our text today represents a new thing happening in the world. And this time it's real.

So Very Hard to Go (play CD clip). Also released in 1973, this soulful ballad written and sung by Tower of Power lead singer Lenny Williams was the bands biggest commercial hit peaking at # 17 on the Billboard Hot 100 and as high as # 1 on many top 40 radio station surveys. This is the song most people are familiar with, even if they don't know it's by the Tower of Power and it's the song that came on the radio that day, obviously put there by the great DJ in the sky to get me working on this unique take on the gospel. When I contemplate these temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, and his subsequent ministry in Galilee and Judea, and his final week in Jerusalem where he was put to

death by Roman authorities, the phrase, *So Very Hard to Go*, certainly seems to apply. Jesus didn't walk six inches off the ground acting like his identity as God's son gave him special privileges. His life was hard. His death was really hard. And since we don't know what his childhood was like our first glimpse of just how hard it was going to be is found in our text for today, the temptation in the wilderness. Hungry and thirsty and tired, Jesus is confronted by the most powerful force other than himself, evil in the form of the adversary, the devil. And he is tempted. Now we could get all hung up on the specifics of each temptation and that is certainly an interesting exercise but I don't think it really matters that much for us here today. For our purposes I think we can summarize these events by saying that what Jesus was most tempted by was the chance to give it all up. To stop the ministry before it got started. To say thanks but no thanks to God, "find someone else to go to Jerusalem because I know what happens to prophets that go there and I don't want any part of it". And isn't that what we are tempted by as well. "God, I want to be a good Christian, I want to love you with all my heart mind and soul and my neighbor as myself, but it's hard. It's too hard. The world offers comfort, achievement, power, wealth. You offer a cross. That's too hard God". Well thank goodness Jesus didn't bail on his wilderness experience after only say 20 days because it was too hard. Led by the spirit into the desert he persevered and survived and toughened up for a ministry that was going to be no walk in the park. Jesus didn't have it easy and neither do we. We aren't promised easy, we're promised a savior. One that journeyed to the cross for us even though it was so very hard to go.

Soul Vaccination (play CD clip). The Tower of Power's most successful album was their third one, released in 1973 and simply titled *The Tower of Power*, and it contained the hit singles *This Time It's Real* and *So Very Hard to Go* as well as their concert favorite *Soul Vaccination*. As you may have noticed it's an infectious, funky tune in the vein of a

George Clinton or James Brown, a song that epitomized much of the music coming out of the urban soul scene of the early 1970's. But today it serves as a wonderful metaphor for Jesus' experience in the wilderness and also for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We all know about vaccinations right? Serum is injected into our bodies to inoculate us against any number of maladies such as chicken pox, tetanus or the flu. We are typically vaccinated as infants and then periodically throughout the rest of our lives. An interesting thing about vaccinations is that the serum usually used to fight off a particular disease or sickness is an actual derivative of the virus you are trying to avoid. So when you get a flu shot you are actually getting a little reconstructed dose of the flu virus so the body can become familiar with it and hopefully recognize it if it comes along again. Is this not what happened to Jesus in the wilderness? The Son of God, the one who was to be without sin, was tempted by the devil to look first to the world and to himself, and turn from God, in other words, to sin. Satan wanted Jesus to abandon God's agenda and to take up his agenda. And I don't believe these were one time temptations. Oh they are presented like that in the gospels because it's easier and more dramatic but I can't help but think that the power and authority and wealth offered by Satan in the wilderness were temptations for Jesus throughout his ministry. We see signs of that along the way. The way Jesus sometimes goes off by himself to pray, to clear his head so to speak. The time he is tempted to set up shop in Peter's mother-in-laws' house in Capernaum and stay there and heal those that came to him. It's touched on by Luke at the end of chapter 4 but it's Mark's version of the story that makes it clear that Jesus didn't just say no to the mob that urged him to stay. It had to be a huge temptation for Jesus, to simply become a bigger more popular version of John the Baptist, staying in one place. Through his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane we can see the temptation to cooperate with the authorities and thus avoid a horrible,

humiliating death on a cross. Friends, I think after spending 40 days alone in the wilderness and then being tempted and tested by the devil Jesus was vaccinated. He was inoculated and thus protected from the future temptations that were sure to come as he grew in fame and popularity. But that's not the best part. The best part is that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has provided you, me and the world with a *soul vaccination*. God chose to protect us, to snatch us from the grip of death and give us new life in Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul tells us:

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death is your sting?'

Soul Vaccination. That's the song title I couldn't get out of my head, the one that caused me to think about this story in a new way. Were it not for that I may have been able to resist the urge to preach this goofy gospel. But the idea of Jesus being inoculated from sin in the wilderness and then God using him to give us all a soul vaccination; that just really resonates with me.

We are well past Lent, but I don't think it hurts to look at some of these stories out of season from time to time. Especially when we can take a familiar passage and see it in a whole new way, and I challenge anyone to find me a sermon based on the music of the Tower of Power. God can show up in our everyday lives in some of the most unusual places; the movies, a coffee shop, the corner pub or even in the music on a Top 40 oldies station. We don't need to make an appointment, wherever we are and

whatever we are doing God will find us if we just keep our hearts and minds open to the possibility. I hope we can all be mindful of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, not just during Lent or Easter, but throughout the year. It's real; and it's not always easy, in fact it's hard; but because God first loved us and sent his son on our behalf, we have a soul that has been vaccinated, not through any effort of our own, but vaccinated by the vicarious love of God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Triune God

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Amen