

**“Waiting for the Other Shoe”**  
**Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-16**  
**Lent 1**

**Psalm 91**

<sup>1</sup>You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
<sup>2</sup>will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.”

<sup>3</sup>For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;  
<sup>4</sup>he will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

<sup>5</sup>You will not fear the terror of the night,  
or the arrow that flies by day,  
<sup>6</sup>or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

<sup>7</sup>A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.

<sup>8</sup>You will only look with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.

<sup>9</sup>Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling place,

<sup>10</sup>no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.

<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

<sup>14</sup>Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.

<sup>15</sup>When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.  
<sup>16</sup>With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

### **Luke 4:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

<sup>9</sup>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, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ <sup>11</sup>and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

### The Sermon

Seventy-five years ago, there was a writer of fiction, whose work mainly aimed at the imaginations of young people, named Robert Arthur. One of his more widely anthologized stories was called “Obstinate Uncle Otis.”<sup>i</sup>

Uncle Otis was so obstinate that his default reaction, if he thought something sounded unlikely, was to insist that it didn't exist.

Somehow, Otis ended up gaining a power of which he was totally unaware: the magical power to cause things to disappear by disbelieving in them. POOF! It would be gone as soon as he said it didn't exist.

In another turn of events, Otis ended up with amnesia, so he didn't even remember who he was. His nephew, the narrator of the story, had tried to tell him that he was Otis Morks, but Otis couldn't remember anything about his identity, not even his own name.

Late that night, the nephew and his long-suffering Aunt Edith heard Uncle Otis go into his bedroom and shut the door. He was still muttering to himself about the people who had tried to tell him he was Otis Morks.

They heard the creak as Uncle Otis sat down on his bed. He slipped off one shoe, and they heard it hit the floor.

“Otis Morks!” they heard him say to himself. “I don't believe there is any such person.”

And then, Aunt Edith and the narrator sat looking at each other, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I am sure there is an interesting question as to whether, say, a church can disbelieve itself out of existence. I would imagine that more than a few have found a way to do that.

I would imagine that most of us—in our spiritual life and in our everyday life—are even more familiar with the feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When everything seems to be going right, isn't that always the time when you feel like something just has to go horribly wrong?

Vivian and I had four flights over the past three days. Each one was ahead of schedule and perfectly comfortable. I found that deeply unnerving.

And that sense can affect our discipleship. Sure, I can trust Jesus—but only so far. I offer my life, my time, my money, happily.

But am I always holding something back, against the day when another shoe will drop, and I'll realize that something even more challenging lies ahead on my journey as a disciple?

Jesus has just been baptized, and is almost ready to begin his ministry. But first, we watch him go into the wilderness. Now is the time to ask ourselves what it means to follow.

What does it mean to you to believe in God? What does it mean to you to trust the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to you to be crucified with Christ?

Now is the time to look into the mirror and ask the person you see there: If God is real, what are you prepared to do?

To gloss over that question is to gloss over deeper questions about what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be alive, what it means to be you.

If we are going to go on this journey, we are going to have to go with him every step of the way. It can't be a thoughtless, empty exercise in reciting the creed.

It's going where you were led by the Spirit. The Spirit led Jesus into a wilderness place.

It's being tested for forty days—forty, a familiar number indicating trial and hardship leading to salvation. It's long enough that it is no longer experiential—a renewing getaway or a soul-nourishing, spiritual retreat—but existential: He has no food.

Forty days of hunger—during which time he was being tested by the devil.

It's when you have come all the way through, and you are famished—only then do the temptations come in their full fury.

It's when, gaunt with hunger, your physical being starting to turn on itself, the Tempter says, “You know, you could just make this stone here into a loaf of bread.

Wouldn't that be good right now? Wouldn't that stop the agonizing wrench of your inner organs?

Wouldn't it be better for you? Wouldn't it be better, honestly, for everyone?

That's when the one without sin can say, "Life is much more than feeding the organism."

It's when, sick of all this nonsense—physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually sick of making these sacrifices—the Tempter says, "You could have everything and never have to go through this foolishness again—the suffering!—

if you'll just worship me, the Tempter, who is the total darkness of Absolute Zero, instead of the Creator, who is love.

Why not just worship the darkness, where there is no responsibility to God anymore, no carrying of anybody else's burdens anymore, and finally be liberated from all this giving and sacrifice and doing the right thing all the time? Let me give you, says the Tempter, the *real* world.

That's when the one without sin could say that the only reality that's worth anything is the One who is worth everything. "The only Truth worthy of worship is God."

It's when, entirely starved for the nutrients essential to brain and body function, your mind plays tricks on you—and you know it, but something in you decides to let the tricks go on anyway;

when everything feels so hopeless and crazy that your mind actually entertains the idea of throwing your whole life away, on the off chance that God will somehow, impossibly, rescue you from your blurry stupidity;

when, having lost all your perspective, you shout like the protagonist in a song by Jacques Brel, tempted to return to the affair that he knows will kill him and giving in with all his gusto, "*je crâche au ciel encore une fois!*"—I spit at the sky one more time!—

and with every molecule of your being, you are ready—you *want* to make that terrible, fatal jump off a high pinnacle,

that's then when the Tempter says, "Go ahead and throw yourself down from here. *Crâchez au ciel encore une fois*, Jacques! 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.'"

Come on! Haven't you ever heard "On Eagles Wings"?

Or don't you believe that God will take care of you?

That's when one without sin can say, God is not my personal assistant, God is not my insurance policy, and at the risk of leaving a dangling preposition, the Almighty God of all that is is not to be trifled with.

"Do not put the Lord—*your God*—to the test."

It's when you've finished all of that trial—all of that ordeal, every test survived, every temptation overcome.

That's when the Tempter departs—*until an opportune time*.

He's made it through this horror show of trial and temptation, and the next three years will change everything about human history, will redefine the meaning of the universe, will bless the world with the purest example of the transformative ministry of Christ, and no one shares that in more human terms than Luke, the physician.

But through it all, Jesus will know that there is another shoe yet to drop.

There will be, according to Luke, an even more opportune time than in this, his weakest, most famished, most vulnerable state.

What does it mean to you to follow him—to be a disciple of Christ?

In God's world, according to the Christians, according to the Protestants, according to the Presbyterians, it is always Easter Sunday. The cross is empty. He is always risen.

But the world stubbornly, obstinately continues to walk a tightrope suspended over the canyon between Good Friday and Easter morning. And the wind in this ravine is always blowing, and it's hard to know whether it's the breath of the Holy Spirit or the empty howling that threatens to blow you over.

I am charged with delivering to you the gospel of Christ: the good news that the resurrection is a done deal.

God is in charge of everything, no matter how bad, bleak or cruel it looks. All of the evil and sadness and loss and pain and darkness in the world and in your soul is, at worst, penultimate.

God is still the ultimate. Love is still the ultimate. You are saved by the ultimate.

In the meantime, we live our lives somewhere between crucifixion and resurrection, between the horror of Good Friday and the bewildering joy of Easter.

Frederick Buechner has said: "In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves."<sup>ii</sup>

And so I invite you into the Lenten journey and offer you a moment to ponder:

"If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

"When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

"If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

“Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?”

“Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?”

Buechner says, “To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”<sup>iii</sup>

What does it mean to be crucified with Christ? What are you prepared to do?

I noticed the other day that right in the middle of the word “Valentine” is LENT. With Lent coming this early, I wasn’t sure how Valentine’s Day could fit into it; but obviously Lent fits perfectly into Valentine.

Maybe that’s appropriate.

I remember February 14ths when I vowed I would never forget how much I hated that day.

When everybody on earth seems to be off celebrating with a Valentine; when everybody but you has intractable plans for the evening; when all your friends are couples, and you’re the third, fifth, seventh or ninth wheel, Valentine’s Day is the worst day of the year.

Some years ago, a preacher at the Worship & Music Conference began to relate an episode from when she was much younger, and she mentioned something about summer camp, and I think there was something about remembering the end of her first major relationship.

And when she said something about her “first love,” a chuckle of recognition rippled through the Auditorium. And she set all 1500 of us back on our seats when she said, “Don’t ever laugh about somebody’s first love.”

Love in its many forms is deep, and the more real it is, the more powerfully it reverberates in our soul. Sometimes it's a rejoicing; sometimes it's agonizing; always it is as powerful and dangerous as TNT.

“When they call to me,” says God, “I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.”

That's love. That's God's love.

Jesus is about to spend every day of the rest of his earthly life delivering the purest example of administering the love of God to the world—knowing the whole time that there is another shoe yet to drop.

What does it mean to you to follow him?

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<sup>i</sup> One source of this work is his own popular anthology: Robert Arthur, *Ghosts and More Ghosts*. New York: Random House, 1963.

<sup>ii</sup> “Lent” in Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*. Harper San Francisco, 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*