

March 8, 2015 “The Great Temptation” Luke 22:28-38

Do you remember the story about Sir William Ramsay? I told this story last week. Sir William Ramsay was an archeologist. Like many who work hands on in a field of science, he had no time for people who believe in Jesus. And that led him to a second mistake. He decided the one thing he had less time for than people who believe in Jesus, was this character Luke who wrote the Gospel that bares his name and the accompanying document, which we call the Book of Acts. He made it his life's work to disprove the reliability of the Book of Acts. Here was something an archeologist should be able to accomplish with ease. It was not as though he was up against God!

Sir William Ramsay spent 25 years trying to illustrate through archeology, tangible evidence found burried in the ground that the Book of Acts does not stand up as history. He made significant discoveries. In fact he made many significant discoveries. His problem became that discovery after discovery, he wound up proving the reliability of the Book of Acts as an historical account of what happened. In fact he wound up writing a paper in which he stated that Luke, stood alone in the matter of 1st century history writing. In fact he wound up suggesting Luke was the most careful writer of history ever to set pen to paper...or papyrus. And therefore he took the next logical step. He became a Christian and he declared that his archeological finds concerning the Book of Acts influenced his decision.

I mention that story again because I want you to remember Luke wrote carefully. He wrote orderly accounts. He depended as much as he could on what he saw and heard personally, and when he included things in his writing concerning Jesus and the twelve, if he had not seen and heard himself, he made sure his sources had seen and heard. This morning's reading belongs to the last week of Jesus earthly ministry. In fact, to put it on Luke's timeline, Judas has already gone to the chief preists and cut a deal to trade Jesus for money. Jesus and the twelve have already celebrated the last supper in the upper room. Jesus has even stated that his betrayer is at the Table with Him. And once again there has been conversation about who will be greatest in the Kingdom of God.

Luke tells us, and his eyewitness source for this story was indeed probably Peter, Luke tells us that Jesus looked Simon Peter in the eye and said to him, “Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back,

strengthen your brothers.” The remaining disciples.

I have said to several of you and in public, that Jerusalem was disappointing in our trip to Israel. And in fact, it was bound to be so. In Galilee, in Judea, in fact on the mount of Olives, and even the Temple steps in Jerusalem, you could wind up standing where Jesus sat and taught, or knelt and prayed. But in the balance of the Holy City, any place that Jesus had been, where any New Testament story involving Jesus, took place, people like us have built churches to commemorate those realities. As a result I tell this story about the Church of the Holy Chicken.

If we read on in Luke 22 we come to the spot, literally the place and the moment where Peter denied Jesus 3 times, even though Jesus told Peter it was going to happen. Even though Jesus said, Peter Satan has wanted to get you in the hollow of his hand. Remember this Peter I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail. Well you might have guessed there is a church built on that plot of ground where Peter denied he had ever known the Man. In fact there is not only a church built on that ground, in order that you might know its significance, from anywhere you can see that church, it's weathervane, several feet above the roof line is the metal silhouette of a rooster. Hence my line....the church of the holy chicken. The rooster marks the place where Peter was afraid, afraid to be identified with Jesus. So afraid for his own safety...that he did the very thing, he told Jesus he would never do. Peter was a vehement man. And we can be sure he said it with vehemence. “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison, and to death!”

You see, there is the greatest temptation we can ever face. The temptation of being certain we will always do the right thing. The temptation of being sure, we would never be broken by time and circumstance. That fear would never overcome faith. That we would never break, under the tempter's power. When things came apart they didn't slowly unravel, there was a shattering. A crowd met Jesus and the eleven. Judas was with the other guys. And Judas approached Jesus to kiss him on the cheek. And there was a troop of Temple Guards. And others were carrying clubs.

Somebody shouted what do we do now? And Peter drew a hidden sword and swung it meaning to kill somebody. Almost did. Sliced off the ear of the servant of the High Priest. It was Jesus who brought order to the chaos, told his eleven to put away their weapons and healed the man who was bleeding. In the chaos people took off. Luke, remember what Sir William Ramsay said? In his estimation the most careful historian

ever to set pen to paper says Peter followed the arresting party as they led Jesus away. Followed at a safe distance. Why? Because he was terrified. It is all coming apart. Judas is working with the High Priest. Everyone else seems to have disappeared. Peter is...careful. He tries to melt into the crowd in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. They can still point that house out to you if you are interested. Imagine the surprise when Peter's anonymity runs through his fingers like water. Not once, not twice but three times someone fingered him as a follower of Jesus. And each time Peter became more desperate to convince the accuser and anyone who was listening that they were wrong....He never knew the Man

Peter was confident. Peter was confident in Peter. He was confident that he would walk with Jesus and talk with Jesus and that things would play out to a good end. He just did not work out what a good end to all this might really be. He trusted himself. Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. That is what Jesus had said. Peter thought he could handle that. Whatever came Peter thought he would know the difference between the way of God and temptation. The great temptation. Confidence in our own humanity.

Let me tell you about a really haunting moment. We were walking in Jerusalem. We were walking in Jerusalem. We had been on the Mount of Olives. We had walked to Gethsemane. We walked and we walked. Next destination...the Pool of Siloam. If you remember Jesus met a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus made a small puddle of mud of spit and the dust at his feet, and put the paste on the man's eyes. Jesus told the man go and wash it off in the pool of Siloam. As we walked these narrow streets, someone nearby obviously had chickens in their back yard. A source of eggs? Perhaps a source of meat. The rooster in that little flock crowed and crowed and crowed. I know hid my tears. I did not want anyone to see my weakness. It was eerie. It was spooky. On a pilgrimage in Jerusalem....and the rooster crows until you finally walk far enough away to be unable to hear it any longer. I had goosebumps...and it was warm.

I mean no harm. The object of this lesson is not to undermine self confidence. And yet you have to admit there is a Biblical principle that it is when we are weak that we are strong. It is when we are certain that we cannot bare the burdens placed upon us. That we cannot cope. That we cannot carry on, that we become the perfect resource for the Spirit of the Living God to use in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The great temptation is to think we can handle things on our own, that we have

the ball and know what to do. Too often that's when the unexpected happens. In Football they call it a fumble. It changes everything. Peter was so sure that he would never fail. He was willing to go to prison with Jesus. He was willing to die even...maybe....maybe not.

Which brings me back to Sir William Ramsay. Brings me back to his conclusion that this man named Luke, the personal physician to one, called the apostle Paul, Luke just might have been the most careful historian ever to set pen to paper. Maybe that is the reason Luke tells these intimate details about relationships within that small circle...Jesus and the twelve. On the one hand you have Judas who is trying to figure out how to make a deal so that 3 years of invested time is not a total loss. On the other hand you have Peter who is certain he cannot fail to stand tall and strong and faithful. And they both get it wrong. The only difference between them is that Judas killed himself, whereas Peter lived long enough to taste the rehabilitating grace of God in Jesus Christ risen from the dead. "Do you love me? Feed my lambs...like I told you to do. Feed my lambs. "When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And utterly broken, Peter, by the grace of God, gets it done.

Let us Pray.....

Lord there are moments when we need confidence in order to function. But it is also true that there are moments when we need to be utterly broken, in order to be an instrument in your hand. Grant that we might trust in your leading, guiding presence and not in our own strength. In Jesus name we pray. Amen