

At the 10:30 am service on February 21, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 and Luke 4:1-13.

“Strong and Stable”

Last week I encouraged us to follow the lectio divina approach to reading the gospel text for the up-coming week. This will continue throughout Lent as indicated in the Happenings article and the insert. Please read these carefully and participate in this process if you can.

In preparing for this sermon I went through the steps indicated in today’s insert. My intention was to listen to Jesus in the text. In each temptation I “heard” Jesus standing strong and stable. I heard the repetition: “It is written. It is written. It is written.”

This is stated within a specific literary structure: Jesus is tempted; he quotes scripture in each instance and provides an interpretation which wards off the tempter. Jesus was pretty connected to Holy Writ and uses it to stand strong and stable.

Jesus’ method fascinated me and I looked for a parallel in modern times. I found one in The Theological Declaration of Barmen, one of the statements of faith in the *Book of Confessions* of our denomination. The same method is used: the subject is tempted; the subject quotes scripture (“It is written”) and provides an interpretation to ward off the tempter.

Before I go to the Barmen Declaration, it might be helpful to provide the context of tempter and tempted. We know the story: In January 1933, after frustrating years in which no government in Germany was able to solve problems of economic depression and mass unemployment, Adolph Hitler was named chancellor. By playing on people’s fear of communism and Bolshevism, he was able to persuade the Parliament to allow him to rule by edict.

As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own ‘People’s Courts,’ initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians.

Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted and patriotic sentiment was equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.

Some Christians resisted. Pastors Hans Asmussen, Karl Koch, and Martin Niemoller, and theologian Karl Barth assembled representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Barmen, Germany in 1934. The 139 delegates included ordained ministers, church members and university professors.

The chief item of business was discussion of a declaration to appeal to the Evangelical churches of Germany to stand strong and stable against the German Christian accommodation to National Socialism.

The declaration contains six propositions, each quoting Scripture (like Jesus), stating its implications for the present day (like Jesus), and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians (like Jesus). It's a more complicated process than a lone Jesus in the wilderness but then Jesus provides the model.

Here's an example of one of the declarations opposing the Nazi temptation. It's the fifth proposition. It's almost a replica of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It begins with an appeal to scripture: In this case, "It is written": "Fear God. Honor the emperor," quoting 1 Peter 2:17. This is counter-intuitive. It sounds like we should honor Hitler. Actually, it's saying the opposite. We honor Hitler by opposing him. It's like tough love.

In summary, the proposition states: Scripture tells us that the State is divinely appointed to provide justice and peace. The church acknowledges this in gratitude and reverence before God. It calls to mind God's world and commandment and justice and thereby the responsibility both rulers and ruled.

This means we obey the laws of the land but when laws violate principles of justice, peace and compassion we can oppose them.

The declaration says to the Nazi tempter and to the so-called "German Christians":

We reject the false doctrine, as though *the State*, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.

We reject the false doctrine, as though *the church*, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.

This is powerful stuff. It was important for a strong branch of the church to take this stand to avoid the total co-option of the church. Faithfulness grew out of this stand and inspired subsequent movements in history like Christians opposing apartheid in South Africa.

At the end of the temptations in the gospel story we read: When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time. The implication here is that temptations will always be around. We have seen how Jesus and the Barmen group stood strong and stable in the face of temptation.

The question is: How do we withstand and stand strong and stable with temptations – personally and nationally – in our day?

While we do not face temptations such as those faced by Christians in Germany of the thirties we need to be aware that even our country can lead us into such temptations.

Look at Abu Ghraib. The soldiers there didn't have to participate in those humiliating tortures.

When we are tempted – which is anything that leads us away from our best understanding of God's will for our lives and the world – we follow the model of Jesus in scripture and the guide of our *Book of Confessions*. We also say: "It is written." The challenge is to find the right interpretation.

There are ways to discern a temptation and to withstand it. We keep close to the Word of God as written. We do so as we are doing today by attending worship where the Word of God is interpreted each Sunday. If we can, we attend the Sunday or Tuesday Bible studies. We practice methods like the Lectio Divina. Whenever you are in doubt share your concerns with a trusted friend and you may speak to me any time. I don't claim to have the answers but I can walk the journey with you.

Whenever temptation comes your way you too can apply the principles of scripture and the confessions of our church, especially the latest ones. You can say: "It is written" and then provide your best interpretation as to how this is relevant to the temptation at hand. When you do so the tempter will probably tempt you again as he or she did in scripture but after awhile she or he will flee – until an opportune time! And when the so-called "opportune time" comes you will be stronger and more stable to withstand the temptations then. Amen.