

“Frame of Mind”

Matthew 4:1-17

Second Sunday of Epiphany

January 20, 2019

First Christian Church

Mahtomedi, MN

If you are maybe over the age of 35, you have seen the video of Rodney King being beaten by a group of cops from the Los Angeles Police Department. The beating was a source of conversation on race for well over a year. When the trial took place a nearly a year later, people were shocked to find out that the cops were acquitted of the beating. The result was Los Angeles being set on fire with riots that had not been seen since the riots of the late 1960s. People who thought that the cops were guilty wondered, how could they get off when it was so clear on the video what had happened?

The defense attorneys did something that was able to persuade the jury to see things differently. They slowed down the video and started looking at things frame-by-frame. Seeing it by frame allowed the defense to present things in a way that made the beating less plausible. They were able to get the jury to acquit by looking at each frame on its own separated from the wider context. If you did that frame, by frame, you got a different result than you did if you looked at the whole video. The evidence could tell a different story if you made sure the video was presented without context.

Sometimes you can use the truth to tell a lie.

Today, we are looking at the story of Jesus in the desert. After his baptism, the scripture tells us that he was sent by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days. During that time he fasted. I don't think he had nothing to eat or drink for 40 days, because he would have been dead in short order. My guess is that he probably fasted like many Muslims fast during Ramadan, where people fast during the day and breakfast in the evening. Now, you do get something to eat and drink, but if you are fasting and then eating for a month, in the desert you are probably weakened and tired and cranky. Jesus is in a vulnerable position.

Out of the blue, Satan appears. The devil has an agenda. When Jesus was baptized, a dove came down from the heavens and a voice said that Jesus was the beloved son. After 40 days where Jesus is famished, the devil decides to question the identity of Jesus. Notice he says all the time, "If you are the son of God..." So it starts, with the devil or the tempter, comes up to Jesus and says, "Say you're probably pretty hungry. If you are, you know, the Son of God, why don't you turn these stones into bread?" Place the seeds of doubt into Jesus, separate this one situation from the wider context. But Jesus responds, tapping into the Bible saying that people are more than just their wants. They are to rely on God.

So, devil tries the second time. He takes up to high place and then tells Jesus to jump. "If you are the son of God, go ahead and jump. God will send the angels to protect you." Again, he separate the event from the wider context. He looks again to Satan and says that it is not right to test God, again we are to have faith in God.

The final test is having Jesus see all the nations of the world. "This can all be yours, every nation would be under your control. Only thing you have to do is worship me." The devil slows the film down to one frame and ignores that the world was not even his to give.

Jesus then gather what strength he has to tell Satan to get lost. "Worship God and only God. That is who I worship. Not you."

That's when the devil takes off and God's angels come to take care of him.

You know what's so interesting about this story? It wasn't like the Hollywood version of the devil. There were no gorgeous people to fall in love with you, there were no flashy cars, there were no moves to have fame, and there was no diamonds and gold to be had. The devil doesn't tempt him with riches, but with bread. The devil uses everyday things to test Jesus, using things that might not even be considered a test. What Satan does is far more insidious, he is testing Jesus by making him forget who he is. The devil wants Jesus to forget he is the Son of God. Then, he can talk about how powerful Jesus was and how everything was dependent on him. Jesus baptism told him that he was God's son. He remembered that over and over each time Satan tries to make him forget, make him forget the wider context.

Just like Jesus, we are tempted, tested by the Tempter. Again, the temptations are subtle but no less profound. The goal is to make us forget who we are and more important, whose we are. We are always going to be told that if God loves us then this will happen or that. We are made to feel we must do something, anything to honor God. We tested to forget how God already loves and in Christ we are loved by God.

It is easy during tough times when God seems distant to think things are up to us. The devil was trying to tell Jesus that Jesus and Jesus alone could fix things. The devil slows down the frame until all you have is this situation, cut off from everything else. But Jesus remembered. Jesus remembered he was the Son of God and that he placed his faith on God to supply his needs even it seemed like that wasn't the case.

As our church is going through a visioning process, it is easy to be tempted to think that the task of revitalizing this congregation is all on us. But we know that this is God's community and it is God that has sustained it for 136 years and will hopefully sustain it for years and decades more.

When we face challenges in life, when we face unemployment or underemployment when we face the crushing weight of loneliness and depression, when we face uncertainty - In all of these circumstances, the devil is there to slow the frame and make us feel alone, prone to focus on ourselves and not trust God. To show us part of the story. But in God, we see the complete picture, and we can look back at our baptism to remember that we belong to God and there is nothing in the world that can break that bond.

The full picture is that we are loved by God. That's something you can bank on. Thanks be to God. Amen.