

February 14, 2016 - 1st Sunday of Lent

“How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb” - Rev. Seth Jones ©

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:4-13; Luke 4:1-13

Last week, we spoke of the mystical journey that starts when we are exposed to the light of Christ, just as Peter, James and John were at the Transfiguration. In the dawning awareness that springs from the light of Jesus Christ and the awareness of the darkness within ourselves and the evil in the world, we need to seek clarification about ourselves and the world and our place in it. This, throughout the history of the faith, has meant withdrawing to silent places, just as Jesus often did. This also means having the spiritual will and trust in God to directly confront that which keeps us from God and loving relationships with others. By taking on the interior spiritual work that walking in the light of Christ requires of us, we learn to dismantle the bomb within all of us - those places and relationships where we would rather simply give into the certainty and justifications we have created and destroy the relationship with another person, with a community, with God. Where are we willing to ‘*push the button*’?

The title of today’s sermon comes from the title of a U2 album. U2 is a rock band who also happens to be Christian. They are not a Christian rock band. The distinction is important if you care about rock and roll. Much of U2’s music is informed by their faith in Christ. The title of the album, I believe, refers to all the wires and codes and commands that go into launching an atomic bomb. Jesus, though, does not launch bombs. He does not separate people into who is deserving of life and who is deserving of death. Instead, he dismantles the bomb. He undoes the wiring, the coding and the command structure that leads to the justifications for launching in the first place.

In the desert today, Jesus doesn’t so much defeat Satan as much as he dismantles and neutralizes him. Jesus dissolves the conflict. In the Gospel of Matthew, this story ends with these words: “*Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.*” (Matthew 4:11) Notice the similarity here to last week’s story. Last week, Jesus stood between Moses - the past, the Law, and Elijah - the future, prophecy. In the light of the Transfiguration, the past and the future resolved into Jesus only. “*And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.*” (Mark 9:8)

This week, Jesus also stands between two spiritual realities - Scripture and Satan. Jesus uses Scripture as a tool to neutralize Satan, to dismantle the destructive call of evil. As my mentor at Luther Seminary, Dr. David Lose, says about our reading today, Satan is attempting an identity theft with Jesus.¹ Satan wants Jesus to identify with him rather than with God. This is where the launch sequence starts for the atomic bomb - our identification of who we are and whose we are. We are tempted **away** from God’s provision, **away** from God’s power, and **away** from God’s provision, and in that temptation, we identify ourselves with another power, a power that is not God. Jesus dismantles the power of Satan with Scripture. Jesus is the bridge between the goodness of God expressed in the Word of God and the evil of the world and the

¹ see: <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-1-c-identity-theft/> (accessed 2/09/16)

darkness within us. In between those two forces, those two sources of identification, Jesus dissolves the conflict and floods everything with the white light of God's love.

In Jesus, the conflict between good and evil, between Scripture and Satan, between self and other, right and wrong, is dissolved and dismantled. We choose a person in those conflicts, not a rule, not a dogma or written law, not a paradigm or tradition, but a God-given person who seeks to take us into a God-oriented relationship of love, faith and hope. This is why Paul can say in Galatians, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28) We are all one in Christ Jesus. The walls between us have been dissolved, made transparent.

The air we breathe is rife with conflict and division these days, from the local level all the way to the top. We can assess blame and pretend that the Democrats are to blame, or the Republicans are to blame. That African-Americans and 'others from away' are the problem, or that the privilege of whiteness is the problem. That 'we' know what love is, and 'they' do not. That 'they' deserve the bad things they get and 'we' deserve the good things we get. But there is plenty of blame to go around, the problems simply change rather than get solved, the divisions and sense of justification just change according to the group we choose to align ourselves with. The air we breathe today is the air of contempt and indifference. Contempt and indifference require division to be present. That atmosphere requires 'us' and 'them' thinking. It is the noise of tin cymbals.

Overcoming the difference means dissolving the separation and seeking a higher way of being. It means living in a way that at once subjects oneself to the conflict and division and at the same time dissolves the conflict and division. It means dismantling the entire construct of the bomb in the first place.

When I was at United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, we had someone visit who was instrumental in starting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission workshops in South Africa right after the end of apartheid there. The TRC would go into communities and bring white soldiers and diplomats who enforced segregation together with the people affected by their violence and hate. In the workshops, killers would be confronted by the survivors of those they killed, the abused would be able to see the faces of their abusers, the disenfranchised could see the ones who took advantage of power. Eventually, the TRC became much more structured, politicized and mundane, but in those early days, it was primarily a religiously led operation headed up by Mennonites, who historically are quite well practiced in the art of sowing peace where previously there had only been destruction and death.

The person who presented her story to the seminary had incredible tales of reconciliation and forgiveness between these once opposing groups. On the community and individual level, healing took place. Each party had built bombs against the other, but in the TRC they began to dismantle the codes and commands that had assembled the machine in the first place. This is an example of how what Jesus is doing in the desert works in the world. He bridges the opposing sides and neutralizes the potential for explosion.

Jesus shows us this is also an internal, mystical work as well. We rely on Jesus to dissolve and disintegrate the bombs we have set in the fields of our souls and minds. We welcome him

into our desert and let him take front and center in the conflict between the evil we do and the good we want to do. This is what Psalm 23 means when the Psalmist writes, “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*”. We put Jesus in the middle of our conflict and then, in his presence, we share together - rich and poor, young and old, liberal and conservative, male and female, single, widowed and married - that which dissolves the differences in the light of God’s ever increasing love. The Lord’s Supper is that table. The table is where our righteousness, our justification, our unity happen - there, in the presence of the Cross of Christ, the Table of our Lord, and the Word of the Lord.

Paul says it this way today: “*But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); (Romans 10:8) For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.13For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:12-13)*

Jesus is doing this work in the desert all the time. All around us, God is dissolving barriers between us and God, between ourselves and others. When we call on the name of the Lord, we begin to experience and become aware of how God’s love through Jesus Christ is ministering to us in the same way he was ministered to by the angels in the desert. So let us in our worship, in our prayer, and in the life of our church constantly call on the One who dissolves and dismantles the ways and worldviews that would destroy our relationship with God and with one another.

Amen.