

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

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, 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.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Who to Trust - March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

Today is a special day in the life of our congregation. Today we re-install our six elders to serve on Session, the governing body of our congregation. This is very important because in our Presbyterian System of being the Church of Jesus Christ, ours goes more than any other denomination to vest authority with the members of the congregation.

I want to give a little talk today about the way our church is governed. Why is that important, you may ask? Well, right now we are seeing on our TV screens a literal battle for the heart and soul of the nation of Ukraine. We are watching very brave people literally risk their lives and suffer all kinds of difficulties — things few of us can imagine. The people of Ukraine are fighting for their right to be an independent nation with the absolute right to choose their leaders. It is obvious that this is a battle between freedom and the right to choose versus the dictatorship and oppression of Vladimir Putin who tolerates no discussion and no disagreement. Right now thousands of brave Russians have been arrested for daring to speak against Putin.

Yet even in our own country, we know that the seeds very much exist to suppress the right to speak and the right to choose our leaders. As the January 6th investigation proceeds, we are learning more about how close our nation came to having a coup of its own and keeping a defeated president in office.

If we don't realize it by now, we must now realize democracy is a fragile thing.

So what does that have to do with us as a church? Am I just mixing politics and religion again? By no means! In fact you can rightly argue that the very idea of genuine democracy in modern times started with the church — in particular the Presbyterian Church. What we are doing today in installing our Presbyterian Elders is actually an incredible act of both defiance and trust in God.

Let's go back in time 500 years. How were people governed? Exclusively by kings and chiefs. One man (almost always a man) was the ruler and he was the ruler basically because his father was the ruler before him. Nobody challenged anything. Disagreement was for the most part, impossible. In addition to the secular government, everyone was a member of the church, the Roman Catholic Church. Who ruled the church? One man, the Pope. Yes, the Pope was an "elected" position. The College of Cardinals, chose the Pope, but the Pope chose the Cardinals. Throughout the church, there were Archbishops, Bishops, and local parish priests, all of whom were appointed by the Pope and his subordinates. The people in the pews had no say in how the church was governed; no ability

to debate the decrees of the Pope. In fact, access to the Bible was controlled by the priests and the Bible was presented in Latin. Over the centuries, a few people had tried to translate the Bible into the local languages. All of them were sentenced to death by the church.

It was only with the invention of the printing press, the hi-tech of the day, that things could change. Suddenly the Bible was available in local languages. Suddenly more people could read it for themselves. Suddenly, some began to see the church was not following the Bible! Suddenly, a major crisis for the Roman Catholic Church!

What to do? In 1519, a monk named Martin Luther posted a list of 95 questions on the door of a cathedral simply asking why the teachings and practices of the church appeared to differ from what the Bible said. Foolishly, Luther thought that his questions were reasonable and he expected that there would be some kind of orderly discussion in the church. We know, of course, he was wrong. Instead, Luther set off a revolution, calling into question everything the church was doing and resulting in a division in the Roman Catholic Church. Suddenly, there were those who supported the Pope and the way things were and there were those who supported Luther and doing church in a new way.

Only a few years later, a Frenchman named John Calvin went through the entire Bible and proposed an entirely new way of looking at scripture, Jesus, and God. He went even further, proposing a new way to operate the Church, how it should be governed, how ministers should be chosen, and how the church should interact with society. His work was called The Institutes of the Christian Religion.

It is important to not confuse Calvin with Calvinism, because the two are quite different, just as the church today does not always reflect what the Bible teaches. Essentially, insofar as church government is concerned, Calvin argued that there was much evidence in the New Testament and even the Old that congregations were not governed by one person, but by groups of elders chosen by the congregations themselves. He found that churches had a voice in who would be their pastors. He said the early church was broadly inclusive and took the ideas of the regular people seriously.

In short, Calvin thought the church should be governed by the elected representatives of the people and the ministers were not superior to the people. Calvin's student, a Scotsman named John Knox, refined Calvin's ideas further, paving the way for our Presbyterian System that we still use today.

In our church, the elders rule, not the pastor. In fact we call the men and women we are installing today "Ruling Elders" whereas I am called a "Teaching Elder." No question, it is easy for the Ruling

Elders to cede their authority to the Pastor and let her or him do everything. But that is not how the system is supposed to work.

So, friends, what you are about to see is democracy in action. The elders you voted for are taking office to govern this congregation. You may or may not be aware that while I can vote on Session, I don't. Everything we do as a church is approved by these elders, whether I agree or not. And that friends is powerful.

Can you see now why democracy took root in our nation? Many Presbyterians came to colonize this country in the 17th and 18th centuries and they brought their ideas of democracy with them. They transferred their ideas about how their churches were governed — from the bottom up, to the way the nation should be governed. Is it any wonder that King George III called the American Revolution, “The Presbyterian War?”

But why? Why did Calvin and Knox want to place the responsibility for governing the church in the hands of individuals, not priests or Popes? Because they concluded, rightly, that human beings simply cannot handle power. They were right then and as we can see on our TVs, they are right today.

If nothing else, this Ukrainian War proves that once again, people cannot be trusted with too much authority. Without genuine debate, without unbiased news and information, without the confidence that we can express our views without being arrested or killed, humanity will inevitably make bad decisions.

And that is at the core of Jesus' temptations. As our theme for worship today succinctly states, “Jesus was not tempted to see if He would fall. He was tempted to show that He could not fall.” In other words, Jesus' temptation enacted for us the three things many of us on some level crave: Money, Power, and Security.

When Satan tempted Jesus with bread, he was giving Jesus the chance to have any material thing he could ever want. Isn't that what money is for? The more money we have, the more things we can buy. When Satan tempted Jesus with the ability to rule all the kingdoms of the world, he was giving Jesus the ability to force his will on humanity. Isn't that what power, what dictatorships are about? Finally, when Satan tempted Jesus to jump off the temple so the angels would catch him, he was telling Jesus to force God's hand, to make God do what he wanted instead of trusting in God to provide.

And that's where we are today, friends. The simple ceremony we are about to have is in truth a profound act of trust. An act of trust in God.

Democracy of all kinds, whether it is with our church Session, or our US Congress, or on the war-torn streets of Kyiv, Ukraine, is all about a fundamental trust that God works through each of us to care for the good of all of us. Democracy is an admission that human leaders are inherently flawed and utterly incapable of making the proper decisions all by themselves. It is only when we trust God to use us, use our individuals gifts and talents, and trust God to guide us through the voice of scripture as a group, not a person, that we have a chance of doing what is right and fair and just.

Once again, we have seen played out for us the deaths of thousands and the destruction of so much because false trust has been placed in human leaders. On this day, this day of officer installation, let us remind ourselves that the trust we can possibly have in life is to wholly, utterly, and exclusively to follow Jesus and put our trust in God as expressed in the voices of the people.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.