



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – February 10, 2008

Love or Fear?

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## Isaiah 53:1-8

<sup>1</sup> Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup> By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

## Matthew 4:1-11

*The Temptation of Jesus*

(Mk 1.12—13; Lk 4.1—13)

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him,

"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."  
<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-21

*Christ the Power and Wisdom of God*

(Cp Isa 29.14)

<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."  
<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>

Once upon a time, God and Satan organized a cosmic chess game. It was, like all chess games, a metaphor for war, in this case the eternal struggle between them for humanity's soul. The game would be over when either God or Satan attracted the devotion of the humans spread out on the game board before them.

It was pretty much a no-holds-barred struggle except for one unvarying rule: neither God nor Satan could deprive humanity of our defining characteristics as humans. They called this the "Psalm 8 Rule,"

Now, it's important to understand the Psalm 8 Rule, so let me read the relevant portion of the Psalm: ". . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than Gods, and crowned them with glory and honor."

You see, on the one hand, we are just a little lower than God, because God has fashioned us in God's image – we are blessed with an ability to envision infinite possibilities. But, on the other hand, we are definitely lower than God, for, unlike God, we finite mortals are never able to accomplish all that we can envision.

On the one hand, we are crowned with glory and honor because, unlike the rest of creation, we have a measure of freedom. But, on the other hand, it is a freedom we can use either to turn toward or to turn away from God. It was this finite measure of freedom that was really the crux of the Psalm 8 Rule, and it was clearly understood that if either God or Satan diminished or overwhelmed our freedom to choose between them, they would forfeit the game.

Now, while the game's objective was the same for God and Satan, it will come as no surprise that their strategies were as different as their fundamental natures. As Scripture teaches, "God is love," so God's fundamental game plan was based on love. God planned to pour out on us an insistent, persistent, eternal love that would speak to the love in our hearts and slowly draw us back to the source of all love which is God. As Satan is the ultimate power of alienation, estrangement and separation, so Satan countered by conjuring a veil of fear. Satan planned to separate us from God with legions of anxieties and fears until we scurried to Satan's altars for protection.

God's first move was, well, divine. He planted in every heart a distant memory of Eden, a faint remembrance of love. The memory, as elusive as it was, provoked a restless awareness that things are out of kilter down here, that they haven't always been that way, and that they don't need to be that way now. It inspired a yearning to return to God, to reclaim the promised peace, justice, and communion of Eden.

You don't need to take my word for it, you need only consider the experience of your own heart. Haven't you noticed there a longing for peace – for a world where “we could all just get along”? For justice in a world where no one hungered or shivered for want of simple fairness? For participation in some meaning more transcendent than a fidgety, self-absorbed lurch through life. Call these idealistic aspirations if you will, but my point is this: where do these universal longings come from if not as echoes of God's voice, remembrances of God's Eden?

Satan responded with a move that was, well, demonic. He countered God's unifying vision of love with the alienating guilt and fear of judgment. If God had given us a hope that things down here had been, could be, and would be better, now, thanks to Satan,

we guiltily blamed ourselves for creation's corruption. All too conscious of our own shortcomings, we felt unworthy of God's love and cringed at the thought of ultimate condemnation.

Again, you needn't take my word for it, you need only consider the experience of your own heart. We've all tried so hard to make ourselves acceptable to our God, to our neighbors and to ourselves, and yet who among us doesn't carry our own dog-eared check list of all the ways in which we have failed: the longed for perfections of life that always elude us, the addictive behaviors and bad habits we never quite shake, the New Year's Resolutions that are almost always abandoned by February 10<sup>th</sup>. Call these internalized parental demands, or signs of an overdeveloped super ego if you will, but my point is this: what do these universal regrets lead to but an anxious, guilty hostility first towards our selves, then towards our neighbors and then towards our God?

God countered the alienation of guilt by assuring us of unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness. Even as the dove was returning to Noah's Ark with an olive branch, so God was setting a rainbow in the sky as a sign of God's eternal covenant never again to forsake us.

It was a brilliant move, and our guilt began to melt away even as gratitude for God's forgiveness and acceptance began to swell in our hearts. Watching in horror as we turned back to God, Satan made his greatest move, inflaming our fear of death with a fear of meaninglessness. The death itself wasn't new, all earthly life had always been defined by its mortality. But as our human consciousness evolved, we became, alone among life forms, the creature that could contemplate our own death. We alone could fear that all our worldly achievements would be eroded, all our relationships cut short, all our possessions stripped from our arms - that all our earthly efforts would prove meaningless.

I say it was Satan's greatest move because the fear of meaninglessness is such a wide-spreading poison. If death is a tomb waiting at the end of our days, the fear of meaninglessness is a vine whose tendrils can grow out of the tomb and back into every corner of our being, strangling our courage and choking the vitality out of life decades before our death.

And I say it was Satan's greatest move because it erodes our freedom without violating the Psalm 8 Rule. Satan

doesn't take our freedom away - he doesn't have to! As anxiety undermines our courage, we rush to give our freedom away. We dash through the supermarket of life trying to get as many tokens of supposed significance into our basket as we can. We turn away from the gifts, and talents and vocations that enliven us to get the wealth and prominence of prestigious careers. We turn away from family activities, outings and meals to get our kids the shiny resumes we think they'll need for elite college admissions. We turn away from fulfilling service to the poor to get the jumbo down payment and the jumbo mortgage we'll need for our jumbo house, and second house, and third house. We turn away from Sabbath rest and time with God to get a few more notches in our belts of achievement.

Now there isn't anything intrinsically wrong with getting an income, or getting an education, or getting a house. In fact, sustenance, education and shelter are good things, very good things. It's just that glossy wealth, diplomas and houses never prove to be the enduring bulwarks of meaning we seek. Lives over-defined by getting stuff may get us stuff, but they never get us enduring significance. Lives over-defined by "the get" trade away time with family, and friends, and pursuits that we love for stuff that gets ripped out of our arms at the moment of death anyway. Lives over-defined by "the get" doom us to fearing the loss of the stuff we've gotten, and when our fear of loss becomes more engrossing than our love of God, fear has become our God.

As God watched his children struggle with fear, God reached for his beaker of courage, and splashed it across the board. As courage battled fear, God and Satan fell into a familiar pattern. Satan would stimulate fear by sending warfare, economic downturn, and disease. God would counter by sending peacemakers, and hope and healing. God would cast faith in his providence, Satan would sow doubt.

The battle surged back and forth: in some decades God held the upper hand, in others Satan, until suddenly God rose majestically from the table and roared, "Enough of this, Satan, I'm going down there myself, and I'm going to end this struggle once and for all."

Satan cringed in mock terror, but if you looked very closely you could see a victorious smirk breaking out at the corners of his mouth. You see, Satan knew all along that he could never best God's power of love. His greatest hope was that he could goad God into violating the Psalm 8 Rule, into taking such pity on humanity that God would overwhelm our freedom and finitude, banish death and meaninglessness, and simply carry us all to his side, thereby, of course, forfeiting the game.

By the time God had reached the door, Satan was already practicing a little victory jig. But, he figured that if the old man was going to jump down here, he better come along too to keep an eye on the proceedings.

When Satan arrived, he didn't like what he saw one bit, for he arrived just in time to catch God slipping into the manger at Bethlehem. Satan had expected to see God bursting into the world in power and majesty, but instead, there he was gurgling in the humility and weakness of baby Jesus. Satan was plenty smart enough to realize what a serious threat this posed, for if Jesus of Nazareth could face down the fear of death and meaninglessness, there was no telling how quickly his courage might ripple through his human brothers and sisters.

Satan raced for his stolen copy of God's Playbook, the Bible, frantically thumbing the pages to figure out God's plan. It was clear enough that God was fulfilling a messianic prophecy, but which one? What kind of messiah? And what did it mean?

If Jesus was a messiah emerging in overwhelming power and glory, Satan could still hope to trigger a Psalm 8 Rule violation; but if Jesus stayed true to the self-sacrificing servant path of Isaiah 53, Satan was in big trouble. There seemed to be only two tactics left that might work, and Satan decided he better try both: either he had to persuade Jesus to abandon his mission, or he had to persuade him to change gears and grab for the overwhelming power and glory role.

Our Lenten lesson from Matthew 4 recounts how Satan waited for Jesus in the wilderness at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, tempting the hungry and tired man with food and power if he would only throw in with him against God. But even in his weakened state, Jesus remained true to his calling, chasing Satan off with an

"Away with you Satan! For it is written worship the Lord your God and serve only him," and then embarking on his Galilean ministry of love.<sup>1</sup>

12 chapters later, as Jesus concluded his Galilean ministry in Matthew 16, Satan struck again. But this time Satan struck through Jesus' disciples. They really were the weak link in Jesus' operation, and Satan knew that he could count on them to plead for the Power and Glory scenario. After all, what human would opt for self-sacrifice if given a choice?

Sure enough, just as Jesus began showing the disciples what it meant to be a self-sacrificing servant, bold Peter sprang up to dissuade him, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." It probably took Jesus only a second to turn back to Peter, but it must have been a long second for God and Satan – for their entire struggle now hung in the balance. They looked at each other, and then down at Jesus, at each other again, and then back down to Jesus. Finally, Jesus' answer to Peter came, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life." [Matthew 16:23-26.]

With those immortal words, Jesus showed his disciples the true path to a meaningful life in a world hedged about with fear. Instead of surrendering themselves to Satan's fear, they could surrender themselves to God's love. Instead of playing out their lives to get as much as they could, they could play out their lives to give as much as they could. Instead of filling their lives up with stuff, they could pour their

lives out in love. Instead of listening to the panic stricken voice within - the one that always whispers to play it safe, they could listen for that other voice instead, the one that says, "Follow me" and "Do not fear" and "take courage, for I have overcome the world." [John 16:33.] That voice has never promised freedom from discomfort, freedom from scorn, or freedom from death. But it has always offered freedom from fear and freedom from meaninglessness.

And so, in the eternal struggle between God's love and Satan's fear, God's love won - in the wilderness, on the road to Jerusalem, and, ultimately, on that cross outside the city. But the Psalm 8 Rule means that every single one of us retains the freedom to decide between love and fear for ourselves.

The decision will never be easy, for, as Paul wrote, this message of self-giving love, this "message about the cross" is foolishness. It runs up against every fearful instinct of survival of the fittest evolution and against all the so-called wisdom of dog eat dog cultures. But the inner truth of the cross is that love is stronger than fear. As John put it, "Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." [I John 4:18]

And so my charge to you young mission fish is as follows, Spend this trip angling to get the lightest duty, the most comfortable seat, the most rest, the most distinguished role, and the envy of your friends and you may come back with a few good pictures and a few good stories. But O my young brothers and sisters, spend this trip spending yourselves, giving yourselves away, pouring yourselves out in love for your fellow fish and for our mission partners in the Pauma Valley, and you will come home having experienced God's infinite power of love and meaning surging through you, for "God is Love." **Amen.**

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<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pol116/grand.htm>

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky includes a chapter entitled "the grand inquisitor," which offers a penetrating analysis of the temptation of Christ in the desert: why Satan's temptations were so profound, and why Jesus resisting them was so significant. Sigmund Freud regarded this one brief chapter one of the most brilliant pieces of literature ever written. The text can be found online at