

## SermonsC16Lent1

Isaiah 58:1-12Romans 10:8b-13Luke 4:1-13

While driving back from a meeting this week (in the – big surprise - pouring rain) I happened to be tuned into public radio. I didn't catch the name or title of the speaker but they sounded like a cross between an economist, a political scientist and a cultural anthropologist ... which probably means that what they really did for a living is journalism. Anyway, the thing they talked about was the discrepancy between how the current state of our country *really is* compared to *how it is being presented* by both Republicans and Democrats. The speaker presented statistics on unemployment rates, housing starts, the health of financial institutions, the percentages of kids graduating from colleges and the salaries they make when they enter the job market etc. He said that the statistics paint a much brighter picture than the one being painted both by politicians and by the general public. In other words, we don't have it as bad as we like to think we have it and say we have it. We feel like our society is crumbling but ... according to the numbers ... things aren't really crumbling. They are coming back together slowly but surely. There is a "disconnect" between people's perception and reality he argued.

His argument seemed solid. It all made perfect sense to me at the moment of hearing. But then, as I often do, I turned the radio off so I could digest the content that I had just heard (and hopefully remember some of it). With the external chatter silenced, the internal chatter started. I got to thinking about the lessons from Bible and the Gospel reading for this week.

I thought first about Isaiah chapter fifty-eight. Let's go back there now together. If you will, please, notice that the reading from Isaiah, like the speaker on the radio, talks about a disconnect between perception and reality. The disconnect in this case is between how the people of Israel *think* they are doing and how God thinks they are doing in respect of the things that matter to God. They feel like they are doing pretty well by God and are wondering why God isn't drawing near and showing up to work on their behalf more. God sees things very differently. He accuses Israel of having become a people that plays at being God's servants and

acting “as if” they are “a nation that practices righteousness” and cares about what matters. (Isaiah 58:2b) “Look,” God says, be honest with yourselves “you serve your own interests” not mine. (Isaiah 58:3b) You do a lot of praying and learning about me. (Isaiah 58:2a) But, you *aren’t doing* the things that matter to me. You aren’t standing up against and working to free people from oppression. You aren’t advocating for and working to bring about social and economic justice. You are **self-absorbed** God says.

Yes, he calls Israel **self-absorbed**.

Now, maybe you’ve been thinking that a **self-absorbed** culture is a new phenomenon that began with the invention of the digital camera and the cell-phone. But, I’m here to tell you that as early as 2,700 years ago the culture of self-absorption was thriving ... even without the invention of the *selfie stick*. It’s recorded right here in Isaiah 58:5. Take a look at verse five in our Old Testament reading. Do you see the word *humble* in that verse? In Hebrew the word is **עָנָה (anah)**. What you need to know is that there is more to the Hebrew word than a single English word can convey. Yes, it can mean “humble,” but it can also mean to be occupied or busied with something.

So, the verse could read “is the fast that I choose a day to humble oneself?”

Or

It could read “is the fast that I choose a day to be occupied with oneself?”

I think the second reading is far more consistent with the rest of the passage. So I think that God is saying to Israel: “Look, is the faithful practice of religion about ritual deprivation ... the kind that mainly calls attention to you and brings you glory? Or, is the faithful practice of religion about me, God? Are you self-absorbed in your self-centered life or is your life absorbed in God?”

Fast forward 2,700 years to Jesus as we find him today in Luke ...

It should come as no surprise to us that when the Spirit of God manifests in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ “The Dark Side” surfaces and attempts to keep him focused on himself. Satan encourages him, tempts him to be **self-absorbed**. Looking at the reading from the Gospel we see three temptations to **self-absorption**. Imagine Satan sidling up to Jesus and saying:

**Feeling hungry?** Why don't you occupy yourself and your time with your personal food security? In fact, why stop at bread when there are so many other good things to eat. Once you get the hang of it you'll find this business of **self-provisioning** very satisfying! It gets really enjoyable when you get so good at it that you can turn stones into things besides daily bread ... things you want but don't necessarily need. Pretty soon you won't even be able to tell the difference. You'll be having so much fun enjoying all the cool stuff you can turn stones into that you won't even have time to think about anyone else. Mark my words, this business of **self-provisioning** is GREAT!

Satan continues....

**So Jesus, it seems like you are feeling kind of insignificant and ignored out here in the wilderness. Am I right?** I know exactly how you feel. People need to pay more attention to you. They need to be more in tune with what YOU need. Let me tell you what the problem is. Your voltage is running low. You just aren't dazzling anybody. We need to get you some power. Power is the answer. Let's make sure that you are someone that everyone looks up to and admires. All we need to do is get you some wealth and a position of authority. You say you've never tried **self-aggrandizement**? You're not sure it's possible? Not to worry! Down here ... in my territory ... with wealth and with a good position of authority all things are possible! Yes Sir'ee Bob, this business of **self-aggrandizement** is GREAT!

Having failed twice, Satan give is one more try....

**Feeling like life is passing you by, Jesus ... like the ship is sailing and you aren't on it?** Time to let fly! That's what I say. Let's get a little crazy! Take some risks. All those other people thinking

they are so special ... well maybe they are. But, you are special too. The sky is the limit. Fly high. Go big or go home. You deserve the best! Royal Treatment for you ... first class all the way. You're too big to fall and too big to fail! You've got the right connections ... the right network. Dad's got your back. The rules don't apply to you. Special privilege and special priority is your birthright. Take this business of self-esteem to the max! You aren't JUST AS important as everyone else. You are MORE important than everyone else. **Super-sized self-esteem** is GREAT!

Jesus, of course, doesn't bite. Three strikes and Satan is out. Jesus does not succumb to the temptation to be self-absorbed. (pause)

Now ... how do you think we are doing in that department? I could be wrong, but I would venture to say that all of us have some room to grow in that department. For example:

An article in *Time* magazine this week (Feb. 22/29 2016) says "Ninety-two percent of American children have an on-line presence before the age of 2. Parents post nearly 1,000 images of their children on-line before their fifth birthday." This "sharenting" it says "has given parenting a whole new dimension: viewer rated performance." The article goes on to say that "Kids today are often accused of being narcissistic, but they are learning their exhibitionist ways from their parents." Now, maybe there is nothing wrong with being an exhibitionist. We all like and we all *need* attention to survive and thrive. But, it appears that "this boom in selfie culture" is also accompanied by "a rise in competitive spirit" and a disturbing trend in the rise of bullying. It seems that being selfie-absorbed isn't very healthy for our children.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes it's helpful to see things taken to the extreme when we want to get at the potential impact of a phenomenon. That's what the movie *Zoolander* does. The first movie came out in 2001. The sequel came out this week. The main character, Derek Zoolander is an "unapologetically superficial and self-obsessed" male model. When the first movie came out people ridiculed him for his signature facial expression. A look he called *Blue Steel*. Now people aren't laughing at it. Instead, they are unconsciously replicating it in selfie after selfie after selfie on Facebook and calling it *Duck Face*. What was once regarded as ludicrous self-absorbed

behavior has become commonplace. And what was once regarded as Zoolander's crazy but funny narcissistic behavior has become conventional behavior in our culture.<sup>2</sup>

**\*\*Now before we go too far with the Facebook talk here I want to speak a word of caution about our focus today. Please keep in mind that the point of the message today is NOT that Facebook or the use of social media is undermining the culture. So please don't come up to me after the sermon and tell me Facebook horror stories or express opinions about the upsides and downsides of using Facebook. This sermon is not about Facebook or social media. **This sermon is about systemic cultural self-absorption.****

Some people have called the generation coming of age and into adulthood now the "Me Generation." Make no mistake about it though ... if that is the case (and I'm not entirely convinced that it is) ... if they are the "Me Generation" and tend to be self-absorbed they come by it honestly. They learned it from the Boomers and that includes a whole lot of us. The temptations Baby Boomers faced and still face has a striking resemblance to the temptations Satan posed to Christ. Boomers, however, responded quite differently than Jesus. They have been identified as the generation that received peak levels of income, experienced America as the most powerful nation on earth for the majority of their lives. And, here is the kicker, Boomers tend to think of themselves as a special generation, very different from those that have come before it. They talk about the wealth they have and the power they wield in terms of entitlement. One author named Landon Jones describes the Boomers as "the pig in the python."<sup>3</sup> While that may sound a bit harsh it does cause a person to think about the connection between the ills of America and the affluence of America.

So, now what do we do with all this? Today, scripture teaches us at least two very important things:

First, it teaches us that we need to stop blaming everyone else for what we perceive to be a culture that is crumbling around us. The reading from Isaiah states that in words that ring clear as a bell. We need, as it says in verse five, to stop pointing the finger and speaking ill of others

and take responsibility for our part in it. There is plenty enough blame to go around and besides that ... blame never creates solution, never brings healing. Blame never gives rise to the kind of reconciliation and peace that comes when everyone owns their share of a problem.

Second, we need to do what Jesus did. We need to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit into places that challenge our sense of security and importance. For some of us this could mean going into a wilderness place outside ourselves ... a physical change in location, going to a new place, getting a new job, or some other way that makes our lives look very different to an outside observer. But, sometimes our wilderness lives won't look very different to other people at all, not at first anyway. Sometimes we will find the wilderness within ourselves when we begin to realize how much of our lives are oriented toward *our* personal satisfaction, security and our well-being. Sometimes we will find the wilderness when we consider - deeply and honestly - how little of our lives are devoted and directed wholly to things that matter to God.

Is there any good news in all of this for us? I think there is. I think there is good news in understanding that the Spirit of Christ is not a selfie spirit. It is, instead, a spirit that sees and responds to others ... to their needs and to their gifts ... to what we can do for others and what they can do for us. It is a spirit that shows us moment by moment and person by person that we are not alone. Whether the world is crumbling away or coming together we are not alone. . In Christ we see what miracles happen when we reconnect with God and with our fellow human beings. *The Christ Spirit shows us a world where selfies don't exist and every photo is a family photo ... every person a brother or a sister.* I don't know about you but I think family photos beat selfies hands down every time. AMEN

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<sup>1</sup>Sales, Nancy Jo. "How social media is disrupting the lives of American girls." *Time* 22 Feb. 2016: 26. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Berman, Elizabeth. "How Zoolander shaped the selfie generation." *Time* 22 Feb. 2016: 23. Print.

<sup>3</sup>Jones, Landon (1980), *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan