

SATAN IS HERE

Luke 4.1-13

March 10, 2019, Lent I

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Sweet hour of prayer –

*In seasons of distress and grief, my soul has often found relief,
and oft escaped the tempter's snare by your return,
sweet hour of prayer.*

One of our great foremothers, Helen Barret Montgomery, was a dedicated practitioner of prayer. By her own account, prayer gave her wisdom and courage.

And she needed it.

In the aftermath of WWI, with social upheaval all around, at the threshold of a theological debate that threatened to tear her denomination apart, Helen Barrett Montgomery, in 1922, was elected the first women president of a major denomination. Do you know which one? Ours. The Northern – now American Baptist Churches.

Helen was an educator and an activist. She worked for women's rights and educational opportunities around the world and, at home, she was the first president of the Rochester (NY) Women's Educational and Industrial Union which had originally been organized by Susan B.

Anthony. Anthony wrote:

[The Union's] numerous programs, under the forthright leadership of Mrs. Montgomery, helped to safeguard the interests of working women and strangers in the city, which had generally been designed as a man's world.

Helen was also a scholar who did her own translation of the New Testament – from the Greek, the first woman to do so.

Now think of this. When there were still people who thought women shouldn't be allowed to vote, Helen was elected president. When there were – and still are – people who thought women should not be allowed to teach or preach the Bible, Helen was translating the New Testament.

By the way, as we are celebrating women, in another time of social and religious upheaval, there was another woman elected to be president of the American Baptist Churches in 1971. Her name was Ruth Swanberg Rohlf. And guess what church she was a member of? This one. She was the vice-president of the local N.A.A.C.P and served on the board of the Urban League and she spent her presidency calling for “an immediate end to U.S. military operations in Vietnam.”

So in honor of these women, I think we should read Helen Barrett Montgomery's translation of the text for today from Luke 4.1-13. It's printed in your bulletin.

Lesson: Luke 4.1-13 (translated by Helen Barret Montgomery)

Then, Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, came back from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, all the time tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during these days, and at the close of them he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God tell this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, saying, “It is written that not by bread alone shall man live.” And the devil led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the inhabited earth in an instant of time, and the devil said to him: “To you will I give all this authority and this glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. If then you will worship me, it shall be yours.” “It is written,” answered Jesus, “Thou shalt worship the Lord, thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.” Then he brought him to Jerusalem, and caused him to stand upon the Temple roof, and said to him: “If you really are the Son of God throw yourself down from here; for it is written, “He shall give his angels charge of thee, to guard thee safely; They will bear thee up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” “It has been said,”

replied Jesus, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord, thy God.” So, after exhausting on him every kind of temptation, the devil left him for a time.

“... the devil left him, *for a time.*” You can be sure that “tempter’s snare” is coming back.

Now I know that ever since Adam tried to frame Eve in the garden, there has been a sordid and destructive connection made between women and temptation. Women have often been seen as the “temptress” – although I like to point out that when Peter tries to deter Jesus from the path he is headed, Jesus famously says: “Get thee behind me Satan.”

Still, there is this destructive connection made between temptation and women. We have seen it on display. A man is accused of sexual harassment and who is to blame? The woman.

When I was in seminary, I read feminist and womanist and mujerista writers who said the idea that sin was selfishness and goodness was selflessness was the product of a man’s world where they thought they had all the power and perhaps could use a little humility.

Selflessness is fine if you have a “self.” And when that is denied to you – when you are not even given the opportunity to define your “self” – something that might look like *selfishness* could be a good thing.

I will admit when I read some of this, I thought “come on; of course sin is selfishness.” And then I realized that I was being tempted to make my own experience the measure of everyone else’s and that I was dismissing the testimony of those who had a different experience than I had.

So you might be interested to know that Helen’s translation of this story, includes descriptive headings for each of the temptations that give us a little window into what she thought these temptations were about.

For instance, “tell this stone to become bread,” is, she says, “Temptation in the Sphere of Bodily Appetite.”

So, when Jesus says, “It is written that not by bread alone shall humans live,” he is talking about reducing human beings to their material needs alone.

Now to be clear, Helen spent her life working on behalf of the material needs of people here and around the world. If there is technology that can turn stone into bread, let’s do it. But Helen also knew that the temptation to reduce humans to material needs alone is to dehumanize them.

I was at a mental health roundtable on Thursday, organized by Laura Van Tosh, supported by Companis, with contributions from Gary Davis and Aaron Burkhalter. It was powerful. And the message was that working with people with serious mental illness is not just about solving their physical material needs. It’s not just about housing. It’s not just about medication. It is about those things but to do them alone tends toward dehumanizing them. Because we all have needs for community and connection and some positive interaction with the world. We all need to be included in some way.

I think Helen Barrett Montgomery is warning us about the temptation to dehumanize people by defining them only in terms of their material needs – their “bodily appetites.”

When the devil offers to hand over the power of the world to Jesus if only “you will worship me,” Helen describes this as “Temptation in the Sphere of Personal Ambition.” And I wonder if Helen thought this was exactly the deal the men in her world had made with the devil. It was a “man’s world” after all.

Ambition is a tricky thing. It’s good to have some kind of energy, some kind of drive, some kind of passion. But when it becomes a temptation

to power, when it comes to believing that – for bad or good – we should be in charge of everything, that’s another problem that warps our human being.

I face that temptation every day.

Helen could not have accomplished everything she did without some drive and without some passion. She was in charge of some things – the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union, our denomination, international and interdenominational women’s groups. But perhaps her commitment to prayer was a recognition of the power already at work in all of us to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

The final temptation is the trip to the “Temple roof,” where the devil says, “throw yourself down from here,” because, after all, the Bible says, the angels “shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.” Psalm 91.

This she calls “Temptation in the Sphere of Intellectual Curiosity.”

Now this I find a little problematic. I think curiosity is a spiritual value and is, in fact, a spiritual practice of openness and wonder and growth. And Helen, of all people, seems to have demonstrated a powerful “intellectual curiosity” about the world.

Maybe that’s how Helen knew this was a temptation – that sometimes the very things you love can seduce you into a world of ambition and insatiable appetite – those first two temptations.

It seems like our world is gathering more and more information. If it is “intellectual curiosity,” it seems to be only in the service of ego and the quest for power. Think about all the research that goes into what we buy or what makes us want to buy things. Sure, people are curious. But operationalizing that curiosity into strategies for control is yet another way that we get dehumanized.

And we are constantly tempted to dehumanize one another by reducing human beings to material needs alone; by the passion to be in control; and by looking for information that will serve our ambition and our appetite.

In the face of those things that would seduce and diminish our souls, we need wisdom and we need courage - both. Wisdom without courage is ivory tower elitism. Courage without wisdom is fanaticism.

Helen Barrett Montgomery had to deal with both elitism and fanaticism. And so she prayed for wisdom and courage.

When she stood up to give her "Convention Address" in June 1922, I'm guessing that's what she was praying for. She started by saying:
I am sure that we are all sobered by the weight of responsibility that is ours. Our children's children will look back to this hour and judge us by what we do. If we are small, or weak, or cowardly, if we are swayed by passion or prejudice or take counsel of our fears, they will write down our failure with shame and sorrow. We must not disappoint the present; we must not fail the future.

And then she began to systematically lay out the temptations of the day.

The temptation to betray our legacy of freedom by the convention adopting or imposing a confession of faith on the churches and individuals. That must have taken courage because a third of the delegates had voted in favor of adopting such a confession.

The temptation to isolate in a world that continued to be frightening. Helen spoke on behalf of a New World Movement that would work for cooperation ecumenically and internationally.

There was the chronic temptation to war. With the world still reeling from WWI and careening toward WWII, she said:

The church must not go to sleep now. We must watch our legislature, State and national. We must petition, write letters, and send telegrams whenever occasion justifies. We must meet war propaganda with antiwar education. The outbreak of the World War found the church divided, impotent, with no clear testimony. The reproach of that war is upon us. We must rouse ourselves to realize that only the first skirmish in the war to end all war was fought, that we are entering upon a long, hard campaign. We must believe that the power to put away war lives in that living faith that has destroyed slavery ...

When she came to the end, she said something that must have been startling – something stunning. She said to that room full of good American Baptists:

Satan is here. He longs to divide us. He rejoices when he sees Christian brethren in dissension. Nothing but prayer can defeat him.

Eight years later, one of Helen's colleagues, Harry Emerson Fosdick, was writing words for the dedication of the new Riverside Church in the City of New York. He wrote a hymn framed as a prayer:

*God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;
Crown your ancient church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower ...
Cure your children's warring madness ...
Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore ...
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage
For the facing of this hour.*

Our ancestors knew what it was to live in difficult times of division and fear and violence. They knew how we can be tempted on all sides to become the very things we resist. They knew that what was needed was prayer for wisdom and courage.

Many of you know that great prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

What does a life like that look like?

At the end of Helen's life, one of her friends wrote:

[Helen's] *zest for life, her very unusual gift of appreciation of all things beautiful or true, good or funny, excelled that of anybody I ever knew.*

I would like some of that. Grant me wisdom. Grant me courage.

And today, if you hear that voice – if you hear that prayer stirring inside your own soul – well, for the world's sake, for God's sake, for your sake, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Conda Delite Hitch Abbott, *Envoy of Grace: The Life of Helen Barrett Montgomery* (American Baptist Historical Society, 1997). The story of Ruth Rohfls is found in *Our First Baptist Heritage (1869-1984)*.