

Soul Force

Matthew 4.1-II

Lent I: March 1, 2020

Tim Phillips



Barbara Gibson lived in Olympia. She was a poet and an environmental activist who believed that creation itself has “soul.” And turning toward creation helps us find our own souls. She left us adaptations of the Psalms and we have her version of Psalm 24 this morning. Please join me.

Gathering from Psalm 24

Adapted by Barbara Gibson

One: The earth is one and all that is in it:

ALL: the world and those how live on it.

One: For the earth rests on the great oceans

ALL: and the water of life flows in every river and stream.

One: Who shall ascend the holy hills?

ALL: And who shall stand in the sacred forest?

One: All who have clean hands and pure hearts,

ALL: who do not worship the marketplace or the bank,

One: who do not give their souls to profit and war,

ALL: and who refuse to believe the social lies.

One: All will receive the blessings of the earth

ALL: as long as they seek the truth with every breath.

One: Such is the company of those who honor the earth,

ALL: who honor the sacred face of creation.

SERMON: Soul Force

[Anthem: Seek Ye First – arr. David Angerman]

Seek first the kingdom of God. Or sometimes we drop the “g” and talk about the kin-dom of God; that is, seek the wisdom of knowing we are all connected – we are all “kin” – to one another and the world. As Barbara Gibson’s version of Psalm 24 says it:

*The earth is one and all that is in it:
The world and those who live on it.*

At some level we already know this. And if we had any doubt, Coronavirus 19 makes it clear.

But most of the time we don’t pay attention to that kin-dom because we are easily distracted. Secondary things, lesser things, cloud our judgment and blind our eyes to that connection.

And we are tempted by those secondary things and those lesser things, to risk losing our own souls.

Sometimes we are tempted by the very abundance of creation itself to cut off a slice or two for our own use. Why not? There’s plenty to go around. We say: This is my piece – with no regard for the connection it has and we have to the whole.

Right now we know. Right now we are painfully aware of how we are all connected to the whole. Right now we are paying attention to what we touch and how that seemingly unrelated contact touches others. Right now we see the danger of pretending we can isolate ourselves from the world.

It’s too bad it takes an epidemic to remind us.

In this month of international celebrations of women, I want to celebrate Rebecca Ann Parker, a former pastor of Wallingford United Methodist Church, a seminary president, an author and co-author of several books, one of our Romney Lecturers and a theological and pastoral mentor. She says:
To live with soul is to live deeply rooted in knowing and feeling that we are connected to one another and to the earth ... Estranged from soul we neither laugh nor cry, we neither savor nor save the world.

When I was growing up, we talked a lot about being a “soul-saving church.” We were a “blood-washed, Bible-believing, soul-saving” kind of church. And there was a lot of superficial and dangerous things that went along with that.

But, at some deeper level, I hope we are doing some soul-saving. Too much is at stake for us to be estranged from our souls. We cannot afford to turn away from the laughter or tears in our own lives and in the lives of others. We do not have the luxury of isolation. If we would save the world, we must find ways to savor it.

I hope we are a soul-saving church. Because we need it. The world needs it. The earth needs it. I need it.

But we are tempted by so many things that turn us away from soul.

Take this story in Matthew 4.

After that powerful baptism experience and a voice from heaven that declares, “You are my beloved one,”

Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

That would, as a matter of fact, come in handy down the road in Matthew 14 where there is a huge crowd of people gathered out in the wilderness. And they are hungry. Everyone needs bread but no one is willing to give up the little bit of bread they do have. "There are plenty of rocks," the Tempter might say, "just turn them into bread and everyone will have what they need – and the people will be so impressed with your power how could they not believe in you?"

I wonder if Jesus refuses the temptation because stones have their own integrity. Remember the Palm Sunday story in Luke 19? The crowd is shouting "Hosanna!" and the religious leaders say: "Tell your followers to be quiet." And Jesus says: "If they were to be silent, the stones would cry out."

The stones don't need to be bread. They need to be stones.

Jesus turns away from the temptation to manipulate creation for his own benefit and turns instead toward soul. He says: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

So the Tempter takes Jesus
to the holy city and placed him on a pinnacle of the temple, saying to him "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'God will command angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

What is it with stones? The Tempter is preoccupied with them.

And I can hear someone say: See, if we were meant to fly, we would have wings.

Here I wonder if this is the temptation to see the human capacity to defy the laws of nature, like gravity for instance, as an invitation to play God.

The old liberal view was that technology is progress. But there is another side of technology. Sometimes it just makes us more efficient at killing each other and destroying the earth.

I'm not suggesting technology is bad in itself – I live in Seattle, after all. I just want to be clear that it is a temptation. And seeking the kin-dom of God means that the human capacity for innovation should be measured, not by the advances it makes, but by the connections it creates to one another and the well-being of the world.

Jesus turns away from the temptation to defy a law of nature as some kind of proof of who he is. He already knows. He's a child of God whose life will be measured by the vision and the hope of the kin-dom. So he says: "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Maybe the temptations had been a little too subtle up to now. So the Tempter gets down to business and takes Jesus up to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. And he says: Worship me and all this will be yours.

If you follow the story line in Matthew – the temptation and the teaching and healing and betrayal and torture and execution – you get to the end in Matthew 28.18 where Jesus says: “All power, or all authority, in heaven and on earth is given to me.”

So I wonder if the temptation here is: Why go through all that? Take a shortcut. I’m offering you an easier route. The story of your life doesn’t matter. Only power matters.

Jesus turns away from raw isolated power that comes with just one bend of the knee to some lesser thing. As Barbara Gibson says:

Who will ascend the holy hills?

Those who do not worship the marketplace or the bank,

Who do not give their souls to profit and war.

Jesus is seeking the kin-dom of God and he will not shortchange his own story and its connection to the lives and hopes and well-being of others to get there. He turns away from the acclamation of power to the affirmation of soul. And he says: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve God only.’”

And then there is this last part. I love this part. The angels do show up but not rescue Jesus in mid-air from a pinnacle of the temple.

Temptation is hard. It’s relentless. It’s draining. But right there in the wilderness there are angels. And they come and they tend to his soul.

“Our souls are weary,” Rebecca Ann Parker says, “Even before the anguishing events” of this century there has been news that has troubled our souls – criminalizing poverty, hate crimes, exploitation of the earth’s natural resources, income inequality, the shooting of children in schools and the faithful at prayer.

To live with soul, she says, it to live deeply rooted in knowing and feeling that we are connected to one another and to the earth, that our life is held in the embrace of something larger than ourselves – a wisdom, a presence, a grace ... It is turning your hands to the work of justice and compassion, your mind to the call of wisdom, your heart to decisions for life. It is making your whole being an act of praise.

We come together on a Sunday morning to give our “whole being as an act of praise.” But more often than not we show up tired and tempted to give up on this vision of the kin-dom. Our lives easily float to the surface of things and to dive more deeply into the one-ness that is soul takes more energy than any of us have alone. We give in. We give up. And we wonder where the angels are. Where are the ones who will tend and renew our souls?

Maybe the temptations themselves give us a clue.

Maybe you will find your soul in the wilderness. Out among those stones that only have to be stones. Beautiful in their own way.

Maybe you will hear your soul in the telling of your own story and in listening to the stories of others.

Perhaps you will gain your soul in letting go of all that energy you spend on control you will never really have anyway.

Perhaps you will feel it in the embrace of something larger than yourself – a wisdom, a presence, a grace.
Or in the turning of your hands toward justice and compassion.

Maybe you will feel your soul when, like the old hymn says, you lose yourself in wonder, love, and praise.
Maybe it's been awhile. But it's not too late.

Dr. King believed that it was only “soul force” that could overcome hatred and the temptation to
disconnect from ourselves and one another and the world.

All I know to believe this morning is that there is a voice from heaven naming you a beloved one and
calling you to turn away from the things that harden your heart and toward that which tends and renews
your soul.

And, today, if you hear that voice ... you know what to do.

NOTES

Psalm 24 adapted by Barbara Gibson in *Psalms for Troubled Times*. Rebecca Ann Parker, “Soul Music,” in *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now* (Skinner House Books, 2006), pp.135-141.