

Shiny Enough: Facing Envy

Luke 4:1-13

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Introduction

In the last two years, I have found myself preaching many a sermon focusing on emotions. This is not an obvious approach for me! I am a thinker, not a feeler. I am much more comfortable problem solving than sharing emotions. But early in the pandemic, I realized that I could not be an effective leader unless I took care of my own emotional life. I set about learning more about emotions, taking classes and reading books and spending time identifying and exploring my emotions. This work was immensely helpful to me as a pastor and as a human. I pastor a congregation filled with thinkers, and I figured that focusing on emotions might be helpful to them as well.

I preached this sermon at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio, in March of 2022. The sermon was preached three times, at two live services and one pre-recorded online service. It was a time of anxiety and fatigue, a season that continues. The sermon focuses on the emotion of envy. According to the “Field Guide to Emotions” (reviewed in this issue), the story of this emotion is: I would like to have what that person has. The opposite emotion most likely is satisfaction. The story of that emotion is simple: I have enough. The sermon is shaped by this question: What would it look like to envy less and experience more satisfaction? That felt like an appropriate question for Lent. This would be an effective sermon introducing a series focusing on the emotions of Lent. Following the sermon, a trio accompanied by guitar sang the song “Lovely Needy People,” by a band called “The Many.”

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The Musical *Damn Yankees* tells the story of Joe Boyd, a middle-aged fan of the unsuccessful Washington Senators baseball team. He is tired of seeing his team lose to the Yankees. He offers to sell his soul to the devil to change that. The devil takes him up on the offer. The devil has an assistant, Lola, described as a sexy and beautiful homewrecker. Her big song is “Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets.” As a senior in high school, I was cast in the role of Lola. I know this may be hard to believe, but this role wasn’t a natural fit for me. I don’t think I was very good at being a temptress.

I feel like I’ve never really understood temptation. Self-control comes pretty easily to me, which means that I have never really connected with this biblical story. This is how I have always imagined it: I picture the devil going up to Jesus and saying, “Psst. Jesus. Hey, man, let’s steal a car, drink a fifth of gin, go to a strip club, and then blow all of our money at a casino. What do you think?”

For me anyways, that just isn’t tempting. At all. And that’s not what the devil says. It’s not even close. The devil is playing an entirely different game—a much

more subtle one, a much more interesting game. He says, “Look over there. See what your life could look like. Shinier. More important. You could be someone. Really make a difference. Have an impact.”

I was in my late twenty’s, attending the wedding of a college friend. At the reception, I was catching up with another friend from college. He had been a Rhodes scholar, graduated from Stanford Law School, clerked for a Supreme Court Justice, and was at the time working at the State Department. That summer, I was a maid in a hotel.

A voice inside me said, “See what your life could look like. Shinier. More important. You could be someone. Really make a difference. Have an impact.” I compared my life to my college friend, and yes, I felt inadequate, a failure. I saw his big important shiny life, and I envied it. I wanted it. Or something like it.

The devil knows what’s he’s doing. The devil isn’t asking Jesus to rob a bank. He’s tempting Jesus to think that things are better somewhere else. He’s tempting Jesus to conclude that his own life doesn’t contain holiness and meaning and purpose.

The devil knows what he’s doing. Who among us hasn’t gone down that path? If only...if only I was ten pounds lighter, if only my house was bigger or smaller or better organized, if only I lived in a bigger city or a smaller city, had a more important job. If things were just different, then my life would be shinier, better, blessed, whole, complete. I would be shinier, better, blessed, whole, complete.

The devil is playing on that dissatisfaction that comes from comparison. We are drowning in comparison. Social media, Instagram in particular, offers almost infinite capacity for comparison. It’s just easy for us to see glimpses of other people’s lives on social media and find ours lacking, insufficient, dull.

Our whole economy is built on comparison and envy. Buy this car, try this hair product, purchase this new and improved smartphone, and your life will be shinier and better. And then there is “Home Edit.” Are you familiar with “Home Edit”? I love “Home Edit.” It’s the home organization method that will change your life. That’s what it says on their website. It’s a full-service operation. The Home Edit team will come to your home and organize. They have a blog. They sell books. There is a show on Netflix. I watched it. They sell lots of over-priced plastic containers that will help you better organize your life. If I could just fully embrace their system, if I could finally get around to organizing my closet so that all like colored items are adjacent to one another, my life would be shinier, better, blessed, whole, complete. I would be shinier, better, blessed, whole, complete.

The devil knows what he is doing. So does Jesus. He says “no” to all that the devil offers. It’s a great story with which to begin our emotion focused Lent. I want us for a minute to be honest about the life of one Jesus of Nazareth. He is a small fish in a tiny pond. He has a dozen followers and draws some modest crowds. If there had been an ancient world equivalent of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people, Jesus wouldn’t even have been considered for the list.

Yet we make the claim that God lived in his life in an unprecedented way, not because he was famous and did important things and won awards and accolades, lived this outwardly shiny life, achieved greatness. No, because he allowed God to dwell in him fully. He chose to embrace his actual, limited, challenging, beautiful life and invited God into every corner of it.

Our Lenten project this year is to try to do a little bit of that—to be honest about our temptations, our yearnings, our restlessness, our dissatisfaction.

There is Jesus saying the ingredients for wholeness are already here. Look around: God is here. In our actual life, with the people we are actually sharing our real life with. Right here. Right now.

What we really, really hope for is the beginning of the end of a pandemic, but we've thought that before, so we are trying not to be too hopeful. God is here. In the midst of a war in the Ukraine—God is here.

What if for Lent this year we give something up? What if we give up envy and comparison? Daunting, I know. I'm thinking this might be more transformative than giving up chocolate. Let's give up envy and comparison. For forty days, what if we stop with the

If only..., if I could just..., when I finally....
For forty days, what if we do a little less of
I wish my life were more like your life,
if I could just be a little more like you.

What if we give up envy and comparison for Lent? Or at least try to. Do a little better. That may mean spending less time on social media. That may mean spending less time watching HGTV. That may mean looking around at our actual life—at the people we share that life with—at the home we actually live in—at the way we live our daily life, and see it as blessed enough. Shiny enough. Whole enough.

I want to circle back to that conversation I had with my college friend. Remember, envy and comparison were filling my soul. I said, "Wow. The State Department, how is that?" He answered, "Frankly. It's kind of boring most days." Then his face lit up. "Tell me everything about your summer. How is Yellowstone?"

What I failed to mention was that I was a hotel maid in Yellowstone National Park, preaching there on the weekends and hiking or fishing literally every day. It was an amazing experience. My friend added, "I'm so jealous of you. Being in Yellowstone. Wow." There we had been, both envying each the other. When we realized that, we had a good laugh.

After our conversation, I like to think that he went back to D.C. and I returned to the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel with a new appreciation for the amazing opportunities we both had, for the gifts that were available to us if we only had eyes to see them.

Did any you of get outside yesterday afternoon? May it be noted for the record that in central Ohio on March 2, the temperature climbed to 75 degrees. It was an

absurdly beautiful day. It was a buoyant day. Everywhere I walked, people were smiling and nodding to one another, and we know that there's still some winter to come and spring isn't here yet, but it was magnificent. It was such a strong reminder (and we need these reminders all of the time) that God is present and active in our actual lives.

This Lent, Jesus invites us to envy less, compare less, settle into our real lives. See God in all of the less than perfect parts of them. See our lives as good enough.