

Missing the Mark

C-Lent 1, Luke 4:1-13, 3/10/19

Robert Woody

Children's Sermon:

What's this? An Arrow. And what's this? A Target. And what do you call someone who shoots arrows? An Archer. It's probably not a good idea to actually shoot my bow in the church, but I do want to talk about it a little bit and maybe it will teach us something about God. Weird huh?

Ok, what if I set my target up right here and aimed and shot my arrow. Do you think I'd be able to hit the target? Probably. And if that's all I did, would I be a good archer? Probably not. What if we moved the target to the edge of the altar, and I practiced shooting at it. I would probably miss it more often. But would it probably improve my skills as an archer? Yep. What if we put the target all the way over to the window. That would be hard. But if I practiced a lot, I would get much better.

What if we turned the lights down, while I was shooting the arrow? That would be harder. What if we had a wind blowing through here? That would be even harder. But if I practiced with those challenges, low light, wind, I would be a better archer, right?

Now, I want to use this bow and arrow shooting as a way to help us better understand our relationship with God. Sounds really weird right?

Ok. God wants you to learn how to be a good Christian, right. How does God do that? Well God sets up "targets," things he wants you to do to learn how to love God and love your friends. God probably starts out with the people who are close to you – your family. The people who you are closest to are probably the easiest to love, right?

What about those who are a little further away, your neighbors, your classmates at school? That would be a little harder to learn how to love them.

What about a stranger, someone you don't know, maybe someone who grew up in a different country? That would get even harder.

But what if you stretched and tried to love your neighbors or classmates. And what if you stretched even more to love a stranger? Like being a bow hunter or archer, if you reach out and stretch and try to hit targets that are further away, you will become a much better bow hunter or archer.

That's what God does. God tries to stretch us to love and help people who we don't even know, and who may be very different from us. But if we do that, we become even **better lovers** and better **followers** of Jesus.

Are you willing to try to stretch and grow to be a better follower of Jesus? It won't be easy. But you will be closer to God and Jesus.

Adult Sermon:

We begin this season of Lent with the story of Jesus going into the wilderness, to be tempted by Satan. The Holy Spirit actually led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Apparently, God thought it would be good for Jesus to be tempted by Satan; that it would strengthen Jesus' faith.

I want us to consider a simple analogy that may give us a new and helpful perspective on the relationship between sin and temptation. The literal translation of the Greek word used most often for "sin" in the New Testament is "missing the mark," missing the target we are shooting at. We are called, in effect, to be God's archers or marksmen. God gives us multiple targets, and whenever we miss them, that's a sin.

So, if sin is missing the target, what is temptation? Temptation is anything that causes us to miss the target; anything that distracts us or interferes with our aim.

So, if we want to avoid sin, first, we need to be real clear on exactly what our target is that we are aiming at. What does God want us to hit? What is our target?

Well, lucky for us our Episcopal tradition has boiled down a lot of Scripture and Christian experience and given us a clear description of our "target" in our **Baptismal Covenant**. Look on page 304 and 305 in your prayer book, or the bulletin insert. The first three questions and answers summarize who God is, who Jesus is, and who the Holy Spirit is, and ask if we believe in them. The next 5 questions set up **targets** for us. They tell us what we are supposed to be aiming at, in our lives.

So what are the targets for us:

- "Continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and in prayers.
- "Persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord
- "Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
- "Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.
- "Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of **every** human being."

Folks, those are our **basic targets**; that's our mission and purpose as baptized Christians. And the purpose of the Church is to **keep us on target**, help us to aim at, and continue to hit these targets.

Each of us, as we grow and mature as God's archers, will be given our own specific targets that match our gifts and skills and life experience, but our specific personal targets will always fit within these general descriptions.

God wants us to continually practice, to do our best to learn how to hit these targets, and to learn how to hit them in more and more difficult and challenging circumstances. Gradually God moves the targets further out, and makes them smaller, or sets up more difficult conditions, like shooting with a strong crosswind. God wants us to be aware of temptations, like crosswinds that might distract us and cause us to miss our targets. That's how God helps us to grow and become better archers by moving the targets further out and by creating challenges, and temptations.

That's what God did for Jesus. God created difficult targets and temptations to help Jesus stretch and grow. Jesus might not have been able to endure the cross if he had not been stretched and grown through difficult experiences and temptations. Jesus was able to nail the target of the cross, only because he had been in intensive training and discipline for years.

Our God also keeps moving our targets too, making them harder to hit. You see, our primary goal in life is **not** to simply avoid missing the target. Our primary goal in life is to **become the best archer** we can be, to become more Christ-like. To become someone who can be counted on to hit the target even under the most difficult of circumstances.

When we get to heaven, do you think the Lord is going to be concerned about how many times our arrows missed the most difficult targets? I don't think so. I think God will want to talk to us about how much we have stretched and grown to follow God's Way of Love. As we mature as Christians, I think we are given harder and harder targets. And we may even miss more often, or our misses may be more extravagant.

Think of David. When he missed, he missed big time – adultery, murder. But he repented and turned back to God and kept shooting at the target. And of all the Old Testament characters, I think David is God's favorite archer.

Well, in addition to God moving the target further out and making it smaller, we've also got the **devil** to contend with, the evil that is loose in this world, trying to distract us. That's **temptation** -- anything that tries to make us miss the target. Temptation is most difficult when it is subtle, when it presents itself as an easier, better way. It sometimes comes to us as the "**good**," which seeks to distract us from the "**best**." Only in hindsight, do we realize, "Ooohs, I missed the **real** target," That's when we also realize, "Oh, that was the devil tempting me."

Isn't that the way we get tempted? Sometimes it's not the obvious evil, but the "**good**" that distracts us from the "**best**." So what are our tools for overcoming these subtle temptations and becoming a better marksman for God? Go back to the Baptismal covenant on page 305 or your insert. How do we get clear on our target and stay focused on it when temptations come to lure us away and distract us? We "continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers." That means regular participation in

worship, and in the Eucharist. That's commitment to personal and group Bible study and learning. That's regular prayer, personal and corporate. Not just "please-give-me-this" or "please-do-this" prayers, but prayerful meditation and listening to God.

All of these things help us see our targets more clearly and avoid distractions. They are not just **ends** in themselves, but rather **means**, tools for hitting our target, and growing us as God's archers.

And what do we do when we get distracted by temptations and miss our target? "Repent and return to the Lord." That means acknowledge our misses, accept responsibility, correct our aim and pick up the next arrow.

God has given you a set of targets summarized in the Baptismal covenant and God's made a customized version especially for you. **Sin** is missing your target. **Temptation** is anything that causes you to miss the target.

So ponder these: Where is the **temptation** in my life? What is it that is keeping me from hitting or even seeing the target?

Name it for what it is, correct your aim, and pick up another arrow.

Amen.