

March 5, 2017
Matthew 4:1-11
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“The Only Way Out”

Good morning. This is the first Sunday of Lent, and it puts us, as it does each year, in the wilderness with Jesus. This is the story of the temptation of Jesus which happens right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: just after he has been baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin John. A number of you were at the Ash Wednesday service this past week. I hope you picked up the blue half-page handout that Elizabeth prepared on the Christian practice of Confession. We had a time of confession during the Ash Wednesday service, and we were encouraged to pray the Jesus Prayer: “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,” during the rest of last week. I hope some of you were able to carry that prayer of confession in your awareness and in your heart.

It might seem like your pastors have gotten the order of the biblical story mixed up: shouldn’t we confess *after* we are tempted? If Jesus had already fasted for forty days before he was tempted, then shouldn’t this Sunday be the end of the forty days of Lent, rather than just the beginning? Rather than trying to convince you that Elizabeth and I know what we’re doing, let’s go back and look at our text from the gospel of Matthew.

Scholars call Matthew, Mark and Luke the Synoptic gospels. They have many of the same stories, mostly in the same order, and even a lot of similar wording. I have a chart in my study Bible -- I’m sure many of you have something similar -- of parallel passages between all four gospels. Most scholars believe that the gospel of Mark was written first, and that all three gospels share common source material which no longer exists. There is no account of the temptation of Jesus in the book of John, but Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar. So similar, in fact, that it’s interesting to note the few differences and wonder why they’re there.

Each account begins with Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit. The wilderness is a real place, but it also has symbolic meaning: it is a desolate place, an isolated place, a place without natural sources of food or water. It's where Moses led the children of Israel around for forty years; it's where the prophet Elijah hid out when he was being hunted by King Ahab. It's a place that nobody goes through unless they have to. But the wilderness is also the place where people encounter God: where Jacob saw angels going up and down a ladder to heaven, where Jacob wrestled with God, where the children of Israel followed God in a pillar of cloud and fire, where Elijah heard a still, small voice. The wilderness is a place where we don't want to go, but we have to get through. I had a wise counselor years ago who helped me during a difficult time. I was probably being whiney and self-pitying at the time, but these are the words which have stuck with me: "Rosanna," he said "Sometimes the only way out is through."

The Spirit is taking Jesus into the wilderness, and Matthew's gospel is the only one to add, "to be tempted by the devil." I have to wonder -- because Matthew doesn't tell us -- did Jesus know before he went that he was being taken into the wilderness to be tempted? When did Jesus know? Why would he go? Would you walk into that situation?

The other small, but significant addition which Matthew makes is that while the other gospels say Jesus fasted for forty days, Matthew says for forty days *and forty nights*. This doesn't change the actual length of time, but it's a coded statement for any Jewish readers. Remember last week when we talked about Moses on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights before receiving the Ten Commandments? This would have been a tip-off that we're talking about a prophet, someone like Moses who knew and spoke with God, but a human being who would be famished after not eating for forty days.

And when Jesus is weak and hungry and alone, the tempter -- the devil -- shows up. The devil speaks to Jesus three times, and Jesus answers three times with quotes from the Deuteronomy: one of the books of the law. I believe that these are not three distinct temptations; they are variations on a theme. It is a familiar theme, and it has a great deal of contemporary resonance -- in the church

and in politics. That theme is power and control. The devil leads with “If you are the Son of God . . .” but it could also be translated “Since you are the Son of God . . .” or “Because you are the Son of God . . .” the devil isn’t asking for proof that Jesus is the Son of God, the devil wants Jesus to start acting like the Son of God. Do something that will impress people, even make them worship you.

The first temptation is about satisfying physical needs -- it isn’t only Jesus who is hungry. There are a lot of hungry people. If you can feed people, they’ll follow you anywhere; they’ll become completely dependent on you. If you can create jobs for unemployed people, you will win their support and loyalty. Give the people what they want and take care of yourself at the same time.

The second temptation is about spectacle and celebrity. Itinerant rabbis are a dime a dozen. What good is a message from God if no one’s paying attention? You gotta make a big splash and start this ministry off with something that will really make you stand out from the crowd. What’s that book you’re always reading . . . oh yeah, the Psalms. Doesn’t it say something in there about God having his angels take care of you? Let’s try that out in the middle of Jerusalem from the top of the Temple. That’d be amazing, right?

The third temptation is about world domination. I know that sounds like something out of an *Austin Powers* movie, but that’s the final play -- for big, BIG power. Of course Jesus, you’re one of the good guys, so you’d use ultimate power for good, and we’d all be better off. I’d let you have all that power and all you’d have to do is worship me.

I know this sounds melodramatic: it’s easy to imagine the devil as oily and obvious and maybe even a little ridiculous -- world domination, c’mon. Maybe you and I aren’t tempted by *ultimate power* but I bet we have all wished for an easier life. God, could you just point me toward the shortcut around the wilderness? Because I really don’t want to go there. I don’t want to be hungry and uncomfortable; I don’t want to be sick; I don’t want people I love to die; I don’t want to die. And this, friends, is why I believe we need confession. If we start Lent by swaggering into the wilderness, because we’ve got great camping equipment and some pretty solid survival skills; betcha they could do a reality TV show about how I conquer the wilderness -- we are in

trouble. These are precisely the temptations which Jesus resists: temptations of power and control and celebrity. The devil loves it when we think: I can handle anything. Confession is acknowledging that we are led to places where the GPS doesn't work. Where our education and ingenuity and effort aren't enough. Where things fall apart and we can't put them back together again. Nobody wants to go there, but sometimes the only way out is through.

Confession means turning our backs on the power and control that the world offers and acknowledging that we are limited, and the only way we're going to make it through the wilderness is if God meets us there. Our greatest temptation is to try to short-circuit this process. But we don't meet God by taking shortcuts. Jesus was a human being like us, with free will; he was also the Son of God. He could have used the power *he already had* in the ways the devil suggested and skipped the whole terrible story of betrayal and suffering and crucifixion and death. And where would that leave us? Lost. Lost in the wilderness with only our best guess at how to get through. Lost in our lives without Jesus' example of love and sacrifice. Lost for eternity, because without going through death, there is no path to eternal life. The only way out is through.

You have in your bulletins a half sheet of explanation and some suggestions for this coming week of the Christian practice of fasting. Fasting has a long history in the church, in part because of this story from the gospels of Jesus fasting in the wilderness. Like any Christian practice that the Church has tried to legislate and tell people that they must do it and how they have to do it, fasting has some unfortunate baggage for some people. Here's how I see fasting, and how I would explain its benefit as a Christian practice: I asked at the beginning of this sermon that if you knew you were being led into temptation, would you go there? And at least for me, the answer is Yes! Of course. I go into bookstores, I visit art galleries, I go to potlucks, I look at Amazon Prime: and these are just the temptations I'm willing to talk about in public. Of course we go to places where we're tempted. Or maybe we're tempted to stay home and do nothing. The reality is that we all have things that distract us from or destroy our relationship with God and with other people. And the most dangerous people are the ones who deny this. Addiction groups are

full of people who say, “Yeah, I can quit any time I want.” Those people are in denial, not in recovery.

Fasting is a way of being aware of the things which we think we can't do without. What do you have trouble saying NO to? Being aware of those things helps refocus us on God and what is most important in our lives. Fasting from food is traditional, because eating is a human experience: everybody needs food. But even just changing when or what we eat can make us aware of food in a different way, and remind us that there are people who can never take the next meal for granted. Other things to fast from could be watching TV, checking social media, shopping for non-essentials. I'm not going to tell you what you ought to fast from, but I am going to encourage you to fast from *something* during the coming week. Make that choice for yourself. Remember, the point of fasting is not to make yourself miserable by giving up something that makes you happy, it's to make you more aware of other things in your life -- including the good things which God provides which we forget to acknowledge. Take your bulletin home so you can read what's there. If you leave here saying, “Pastor Rosanna said I have to skip a meal, and there's no way I'm doing that.” God bless you, but you have missed the point.

Here's the end of our text from Matthew: it's a word of comfort in the lonesome valley of the wilderness, “Then the devil left [Jesus] and suddenly the angels came and waited on him.” Our closing chorus captures this thought. And I will raise you up on eagle's wings is based on Psalm 91. This is the same psalm that the devil quoted to try to get Jesus to jump from the Temple mount. It is only when we go into the wilderness that we can truly appreciate God's protection and provision. May God bless this Lenten journey: because the only way out is through. Amen.