

Sermon on Lent 1 2020 Year A
(Matthew 4:1-11; cf. Gen 2; Rom 5)

When my Dad was in university he roomed with a friend who would later sit as a federal cabinet minister. They used to talk about ideals, my father about how he could make a difference for the better as a teacher or a pastor (he ended up an educator); his friend how he could make a difference as a principled politician.

My Dad was always disappointed that when his friend reached the political heights those ideals, talked about so passionately as they dreamed of the future, those dreams of service, ran headlong into that intractable reality called the compromises of the status quo.

Whenever someone who has high ideals is appointed or elected to a high political position, the dreams of service, of “making a difference” remain but also other voices begin to crowd in:

“Psst, now at last you can position yourself to make some real money! Even if you lose the next election you’ll be on three corporate boards.”

“Make the right moves and you’ll be a regular on Power and Politics.”

“Oh, and by the way, that party activist, that journalist you’ve never liked, that local councilman who denied your pet project back in the day, now that you’ve got power, you can get even!”

And of course, though this illustration sets up the overt comparison with what Jesus was going through in the wilderness as he faced monumental tests before he stepped onto Israel’s religious and political stage, what my Dad’s friend faced, what Jesus faced is what my Dad faced, what you and I face, though in very different ways and places.

I tell my Dad that becoming a school principal was *more* political than becoming a cabinet minister and I’m not really joking!

This gospel text is given to us on the first Sunday of Lent because it foreshadows all that was to come for Jesus; the choices he makes and the resulting pushback explains how it is that we are now following him to Jerusalem.

And at the same time, it foreshadows our lives, it maps our journeys even if we never dabble in “official politics.”

Jesus’ “whispers in the dark” that urge him to distort his vocation are, as Carl Jung would be put it, archetypes, patterns writ large, of our own temptations to distort our vocations and loves.

But there’s good news here as well. In Christ, we are called to begin to recognize that however much our biology, our society, our feelings, our circumstances try to tell us who’s boss, we can, with God’s help “welcome these whispers,” using them to recognize our tendencies

recognizing that within us is Spirit, Christ's Spirit, calling us, committed to us and empowering us.

We need to remember that Jesus felt what we feel; he wanted to live, have a family, be secure, be happy, make a difference, to get ahead was the reason these tests for security, recognition, to make the ultimate difference were actually temptations.

Of course, with Jesus, these temptations are presented in a kind of ultimate, supreme form, but in smaller ways, all the time, they are still the sorts of temptations we face.

When you feel tempted to take a short cut and cheat on your taxes, are you not being tempted to make bread from stone? When we in various ways put money first, are we not bowing to one of the satans of this age?

Whether you believe in a personal devil, social constructs that encourage evil or simply our finite desires playing tricks on us (the Bible gives credence to all three) we are all thrust into the fray, joined to the struggle that Jesus enacts for us.

And what Jesus enacts is counter-intuitive; victory comes for him, not from strength, or at least the kind of strength we're encourage towards from knee-high to a grasshopper; the "rely on yourself" strength that has its place but often compromises with evil

Here we see the counter-intuitive strength of partnership, dependence even, with God's Spirit.

Like Jesus in this story, often we've felt the blessing of God's nearness and then it all comes crashing down and all of a sudden, sickness, death, a feeling of being bereft engulfs us and we wonder how we could have ever felt God's closeness.

But it is precisely these conditions under which we can begin to discover how God's strength works with us.

When the "whispers in the dark" come whether it's just "give up on this God thing" or "just go out and enjoy yourself, you're missing out," or the more overt temptations to short-circuit God's path to true flourishing we begin to grasp after what will at least soothe us.

As Nietzsche put it we try in various ways "to create the feeling of power rising in us." What is counter-intuitive about what Jesus shows us here is trust in the absence of feeling much of anything.

Jesus didn't react, he didn't try to recall the feeling of power rising; in his case the baptism he'd just experienced: the visionary moments when the voice had proclaimed his belovedness.

He simply said, "but it is written..." Each of the scriptures Jesus quotes were given to Israel in the context of her own wilderness experiences and when Israel had doubted God's presence and goodness, complaining bitterly.

By reaching out to God in this way, by asking God to save him in this way he short circuited our normal way of responding.

He's teaching us one of life's most important but hardest lessons, how to rely on God's goodness and promises even when we don't feel God or see direct evidence of that goodness in our circumstances.

This doesn't come about simply by quoting scripture; I'm not advocating a certain biblical memorization program. We note that the Satan figure also quotes scripture; rather what Jesus shows us is a way of dependence, a way of sinking into trust.

Feeling emotions, feeling up, feeling down, feeling power, feeling powerlessness, feeling the need for love and wanting to make that happen; all of these and a million other realities are so human and not wrong!

What can go wrong and often does is when we try to fulfill those feelings in ways that end up damaging ourselves and others, this too is the most normal of things: the broken heart, the regrets over our past decisions etc.

God is not wanting us, in Lent, to further condemn ourselves but to face ourselves. The Good News of Christ is that he is our faith and trust! He is our victory in the sense that we learn in and through him partnership with God!

When we come to this table in the context of whatever wilderness we find ourselves in we are choosing to live not by bread alone but by words that come from the mouth of God, words that formed the world, formed us and continue to do so as we say "yes."

We need each other in this: sharing our wildernesses with each other is a way that feels weak but is the strength of God.

Recently I had the privilege of praying with someone who was being tormented with what they described as an evil presence (whether this was imagined, something outside of the person or twisted emotional states, mental illness matters little except that I believe in always working closely together with health professionals and recommended that this person get assessed which they already had)

I had the great privilege of being with this person as they expressed trust in God in the middle of fear.

Sometime later I got an excited call, "its working, I can go outside and notice the trees, the sky and the clouds and feel more alive than I have in ages."

This person will never know the scriptures in the way Jesus exhibits but they were living inside his archetype: trusting in God's words of forgiveness, goodness and hope.

The whispers never go away but now this person knows they're not the boss. This person still feels the ancient hungers, the swirling dust and heat that disorients on our journey but now they also know what we will say in a minute: in Christ, through Christ, with Christ. Amen.