

March 1, 2020

First Sunday of Lent

Matthew 4: 1-11

Prayer: Dear Lord, We are honored to be in your presence this morning. As we begin our Lenten journey, we seek your face. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Power to Fix

Last Wednesday – Ash Wednesday, we call it in the church -- was the start of Lent. We wrote out our sins, our hurts, our burdens, on little pieces of paper, then burned them. Tandy and Jonathan placed the resulting ashes on our foreheads.

Those ashes symbolized confession, certainly. But they also symbolized our grief, our suffering, our intention to wear each other's burdens during this Lenten season.

The season of Lent is 40 days of solidarity with Jesus' suffering in the wilderness. It is 40 days we set aside to contemplate our lives, our purpose, our past, our future. It is a time to take stock, to see where we are.

We do this for 40 days because, as we will read in today's Scripture, Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days. But the 40 days that we observe aren't continuous. Every seven days they are interrupted by a Sunday, a resurrection day, a vacation day from Lent. The resurrection, you see, overcomes the suffering.

And so I want to start today with a little resurrection.

We had our volunteer breakfast in February. And quite appropriately, the baker of our biscuits for 107 people was Morgan Graham.

We met Morgan when she was addicted to heroin and living in the woods. Slowly, tentatively, she began meeting with Robin. Then she got

sent to jail for several months, which gave her time to think. When she got out, she told Robin she wanted help getting clean.

She did get clean. Then she got a job at Tommy's Ham House.

And she went through Circles, which is our year-long program in which someone is "encircled" with five or six friends, encouragers, networkers, cheerleaders. The night of her graduation, Tommy sent over a bouquet of flowers with a card that read, "To the world's best biscuit maker."

Long after that graduation, Morgan has continued to visit Triune and meet with her Circle members, who are now friends. So when we told her about our volunteer breakfast, she made 50 biscuits with sausage, and 50 with ham. But then she made her special-recipe biscuits -- with sausage, cheese and special spices baked in. Tommy doesn't even sell those. They're made only for special customers. Which we now are.

In our world of poverty and homeless ministry, the temptation is to *fix* someone. To pull out that wallet, to shove someone into an apartment, and everything is fixed.

But Morgan – and all the other Morgans we meet – was no quick fix. Her movement toward goals was the result of long months, even years, of people taking the time to know her, encourage her, let her know she is a beloved child of God.

Lots of people. Robin. Andrew. Circles director Cheri. Her Circles team of Robert Gage, Beth Andrews, Mara Townsend, Denise Smith and Mike Winiski.

You know, people call us almost every day and ask: *What can I do? How can I help?*

The temptation is to solve this problem of poverty and homelessness right now, and be done with it. But our answer to those callers is counterintuitive ... and often, I fear, seen as too time-consuming, too slow, too burdensome.

You can come and be with us, we say. You can come and make friends.

In today's Scripture passage, we're going to see Jesus tempted. We're going to see Satan calling and saying, *Here's what you need to do. Just do this.*

And we're going to see Jesus at every suggestion, turning the question around, saying, *No, that's not what I am going to do. That's not the answer.*

While we often look at Jesus' wilderness story in isolation, it was not, in fact, written in isolation. It is a statement on the baptism story that came right before.

At the end of chapter 3 in Matthew's gospel is the story of John baptizing Jesus. It ends with these words: **“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a**

dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ ” (Mt. 3: 16-17)

Just like in Charles’ painting.

The very next word is “Then.”

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness....”

This entire wilderness adventure is a response to the declaration at the baptism that Jesus is God’s Son. This claim of divinity must be explored. It must be answered.

Then ... what? Then what does it mean to be God’s Son?

Matthew answers with this story of Jesus facing down Satan in the wilderness.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Matthew 4: 1-11.**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you

are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",

and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

⁷Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰Jesus said to him,

'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him." '

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew tells this story in a style typical of Jewish literature of the day. This is a three-part test for Jesus, with each part pointing back to Jewish Scripture. Pointing back to when another Son of God, the nation of Israel, faced a similar wilderness experience.

Of course, Israel failed each test. And Matthew, that gospel writer most concerned with history, wants to show how Jesus takes each test that Israel failed and turns it on its head.

The first thing we read is that Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights. That number didn't come out of nowhere.

Do you remember how we've talked about Matthew portraying Jesus as a new Moses? He wanted Jewish Christians who might be tempted to leave their fledgling Christian faith to remember that Jesus

was the promise of the Old Testament. Jesus was a new Moses who would lead Jews and Gentiles alike into the kingdom of God.

And so, like Moses who spent 40 days and 40 nights on a mountaintop receiving the Ten Commandments, and like the nation of Israel that wandered 40 years in the wilderness, now Jesus spends his 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness.

During Israel's 40 years, the people grew hungry. God fed them with manna from heaven. The book of Deuteronomy says, **“He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”** (Deut. 8:3)

So now, in Matthew's story of the new Son of God, we get to Test No. 1: The tempter says to a famished Jesus: **“If you are the Son of**

God – (as claimed at your baptism!) -- command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

And Jesus quotes that old line from Deuteronomy. “...**One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.**”

It is a reminder that God provided for Israel during *that son's* wilderness experience. And it is a proclamation that this new Son will live by the word of God.

Test No. 2. In the fable-like telling of this story, the tempter then whisks Jesus to another locale. He places him on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and urges him to jump to show his power. He even quotes Psalm 91, telling Jesus that surely the angels will catch him.

This calls to mind another testing story about God's son, the nation of Israel. After leaving Egypt, the people complained to Moses because they had no water.

Moses said, “Why do you test the Lord?” But the people were ready to stone him, so Moses went to the Lord and begged for advice. The Lord advised him to strike a rock at Mount Horeb and water would come forth. Moses did so and then called the place Massah, because it was a place where the Israelites tested the Lord.

The old son, Israel, tested the Father. But the new son, Jesus, does not.

Instead he quotes Deuteronomy again. Matthew doesn't use the entire quote, but here it is: **“Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.”** (Deut. 6: 16)

Test No. 3. The tempter offers Jesus dominion over all the kingdoms of the world. Again Jesus appeals to Deuteronomy: **“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”**

As we know, Israel failed that test miserably, worshipping the golden calf at the very time Moses was getting the Ten Commandments from God.

So in this intriguing little story, we have an exploration of how Jesus faced the same tests that ancient Israel once faced. But where God's first son failed every test, Jesus passes.

He passes by refusing to resort to miracles.

He passes by refusing to do the very things we expect of gods.

He passes by appealing to trust and obedience rather than flash and drama.

That's Matthew's message. This new Son of God is a new creature. He won't use his power for himself.

And then there's that word again: "Then."

"Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

What are we to make of this strange story of Jesus battling Satan?

What are we to do with story of Jesus' time in the desert, faced with temptation?

I'd say we are to look at our own wilderness experiences. We may go there by way of a hurtful divorce, or by the death of someone close to us.

We may go there through job loss and the deadening depression and inertia that follow.

We may go there through an addiction that takes hold of our minds and bodies until nothing else can get in.

Those are our wilderness experiences.

If we are not currently in the wilderness ourselves, I think our temptation can be much like Satan's. *We have the power to fix this. We have the power to fix you.*

Jesus wasn't buying that razzle dazzle. And neither should we.

In every test, he sought God's will – not his own, and certainly not the tempter's.

And that's where I think we should land as we try to help the next Morgan.

It is the height of arrogance to think we can *pull* people out of the wilderness. What we *can do* is enter it with them and walk alongside.

It is the height of arrogance to think we can give enough to *buy* someone's way out of the wilderness. What we can give is ourselves, our time, our kindness, our encouragement, our love.

God never promised that we wouldn't go into the wilderness. What he promised was that he would go there with us.

As his followers, we make the same promise to each other.

Amen.