A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Lent I ~ Matthew 4:1-11 ~ February 26, 2023

Through the centuries, we’ve divvied up stories about Jesus into two categories. With some, we say, “here’s what Jesus did, what Jesus said; let’s try to live that way, too.” Care for the poor, welcome the stranger, speak truth to power. We’ll call these “let’s live like Jesus” stories. With others, we say, “here’s what Jesus did; *thank you* for doing that Jesus, now we can live differently.” The virgin birth, raising the dead, dying on a cross, being resurrected. We’ll call these “Wow! Thank you Jesus!” stories. You’d think heading outing out into a desert with nothing but the shirt on your back, for forty days and nights, *in order to* meet Satan… Shouldn’t that be a “wow! Thank you Jesus” story – and leave it at that. Yet, here we are. The beginning of Lent: the church says, go on, off you go, and sends us out to face God knows what.

So if the church is telling us, “here, you try it too – even metaphorically” do we have within or among ourselves whatever made it possible for Jesus to survive this test? Yes. What Jesus had and what we need is trust. Trust. Trust in God. Not, trust in ourselves. Jesus didn’t go out there saying, “I’ve got this!” Jesus went trusting that the Spirit had led him, that God would see him through.

In addition to trust, the context is key - where we are in the journey. The “arc of the moral universe”, to use Dr. King’s phrase, begins with each and every person as a beloved child of God and bends, however long it takes, toward ultimate consummation as the beloved community in which love with justice defines every relationship. We begin as beloved; we are on the way toward beloved community. It’s in the middle here that things get complicated; we tend to get off track.

I see this pattern, this arc, in three ways today as we embark upon this season of Lent. One is the path Jesus is on, two is the path we each are on as individuals, and three is our collective path as a society. They’re not precise parallels, so bear with me.

First, Jesus. Context: Immediately before Jesus’ time in the wilderness and his encounter with Satan, Jesus was baptized, the spirit poured out, and God affirmed, you are my beloved. Immediately after this, Jesus embarks upon his ministry to bring about the beloved community. In order to proceed from beloved of God to creating beloved community Jesus had first to meet the demons.

Let’s note some things here that will be applicable in those other arcs. Jesus does not stumble into the wilderness by accident. The spirit led him, the spirit tended to him. When he was famished, the tempter came. Turn these stones to bread; throw yourself from the pinnacle; bow down and worship me. “The tempter offers bread, power, and safety. But it could be something else. Because the point isn’t the specific temptations, but rather the underlying nature of temptation itself.” (David Lose) It might as well have been confidence, fame, and security; beauty, comfort, and wealth.

The tempter said, let’s make this about you, Jesus. If you are the Son of God… You can turn stones into bread. You’re important; God will rescue you. At each, Jesus turned – in trust – and said, not me; God is faithful. The temptation for Jesus, as for us all, is to “shift our allegiance and confidence away from God and toward some substitute that promises a more secure identity. This passage is really about identity theft.” If the tempter succeeds Jesus’ true identity will be deformed, his life as beloved will be derailed. I think we know what that feels like.

For our individual journeys (arc), I want to take this to a personal place and talk about how I enter the wilderness of prayer. I set aside a period of time. I center myself in the presence of God – which is to say, I sit comfortably, with eyes closed. I take deep breaths. Feel the breath enter as I inhale. As I exhale. I am still. Relax my face, shoulders, muscles. Open my attention to God within. Sense God’s creation around me. I may have selected a few verses of scripture to read, savor, and in which I may dwell for these minutes. Or I may have selected that I will honor my desire to be still, present in the presence of God.

Invariably, insistently, voices and urges arise, my mind wanders.

Here, there are differing paths in prayer. When something comes up, I might seek to note it, then simply return to my breath. Alternatively, when something comes up, I might receive it with wonder. There are times in prayer when we may meet parts of ourselves that we otherwise seek to avoid or keep hidden. Parts of ourselves we’re ashamed of, or that we fear. Little child hopes that were abandoned or squashed. We may meet these parts anytime; we react in a way that surprises us; where did that come from? Or we find ourselves suddenly hijacked by an urge. Overwhelmed by a feeling, pulled off center.

But in prayer, we return to the breath. Resting now in the presence of the spirit we may engage these parts of ourselves with wonder. Even, especially those parts we might otherwise seek to banish. God loves every part of us. Our wholeness as beloved of God and our capacity to participate in the beloved community comes as we too embrace every part of ourselves.

At some point the bell rings on my meditation timer app. I say the Lord’s prayer. Afterwards, I might journal and note any feelings of desolation or consolation. And off I go. Then I do it again. Every day. It’s not magic. Does it work, a friend asked, noting that I’m wound pretty tight? “I know,” I said; “imagine how I’d be if I didn’t pray!”

The third arc. This year, during Lent, I invite you to join me and fellow Columban’s in paying special attention to the ways in which the sin of racism in this country inhibits our movement toward creating beloved community. We are called to a season of reckoning. We are called to look, yet again, and steadily at racism in our lives - that we may see with new eyes how it came to be, the damages done, and the ways it is perpetuated. As Christians, we are called to see how our theology and the practices of the church have contributed to, benefitted from, and perpetuated racial injustice. We have been deformed from our identity as beloved and derailed from our calling to bring about beloved community. So how are we to repent, to change our ways? How are we to trust, make amends, to repair?

In their book, Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair, Duke Kwon and Gregory Thompson make the case that racism is best understood as theft – theft of truth, power, and wealth. What did Satan promise? Bread, power, and safety. They propose two ethical constructs to frame our call as Christians to address this theft. One is the path of restitution, which says that if something was taken, then those who took it are culpable and must repay. The second is the path of restoration. Because we are beloved, and called to create beloved community, our faith calls upon us, they write (p.160), “to spare no effort in repairing what was broken and to spare no expense in restoring to our neighbors all that was unjustly taken, [and] to do so *even if we ourselves are not directly culpable.*”

Their framework situates us clearly on the path toward beloved community, yet now beset with risks to be taken and fear to be met. Drawing upon the story of the Good Samaritan, they illustrate the need many have to shift our perspective. Noting how fear drives us toward self-preservation, Dr. King wrote of this story, “I imagine that the first question which the priest and Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But by the very nature of his concern, the good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”

Intentionally entering into a deeper exploration of how our faith calls us, how God calls us, to address and repair the damage of racism – through lamentation, repentance, and reparation… this is costly. It is not to be undertaken trusting in our own strength. Trust in God. As the church, we are invited to cultivate “a spirituality of vulnerability;… to nurture a way of living with ourselves, with God, and with others where our deepest wounds are not concealed by but centered in the life of faith.” (p.189)

I have nothing more to say at the moment. So in the next minute or two of silence, let me ask, how are you feeling right now? What do my words bring up for you? Do you feel resistant? Hopeful? Weary? Committed? I am not asking you to feel a particular way. I am asking you to notice how you feel. And then to wonder about that. Bring it to God. Amen.