**Sermon for February 26, 2023 First Sunday in Lent Gospel reading: Matthew 4:4-11**

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Dear friends in Christ, grace be to you and peace from God our creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

As Jesus was baptized just prior to our Gospel reading today, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirt descended on him and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Last Sunday, in Matthew’s Gospel reading for Transfiguration Sunday, there was also a voice heard from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” In the season of Epiphany, (the weeks after Christmas to last week), the Gospel readings were bracketed with this revelation “from heaven”: this voice, identifying Jesus states not once but twice, that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, in whom God is pleased.

Now, today, on this first Sunday in Lent, in the very next verse after the text about the Baptism of Jesus, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. First, we are informed that Jesus fasts for weeks. And then the devil shows up, now that Jesus is good and hungry, and tempts him. And the pattern of the temptations is revealed. Jesus, Son of God, you can do something to address this situation the devil craftily tells him. Jesus resists and quotes scripture to the devil. It is written, he says. Three times this pattern unfolds. Jesus passes the test put to him by the devil and in that reveals (to us) that he is worthy of trust, of our trust.

In the first temptation, Jesus is offered stones which he can turn into bread. Famished, tempted, Jesus references Deuteronomy 8. And suddenly this isn’t about just bread, but about Jesus’ and our relationship with God. Who do you trust? In what do you place your trust? This question gets personal very quickly. It’s not about the bread, but about how to live in relationship with God, and not just in pious or polite ways, but in the depth of our being. In a world that sees scarcity, that perceives the need to cling to “what is mine”, can you trust that God provides, enough and not just enough, but abundantly? The Israelites in the wilderness were instructed to gather enough manna for the day, and no matter how much they gathered, it was enough for the day, but if they tried to save some for the next day, it was moldy and maggoty. How do you seek to hold on tightly to what you have, not trusting God’s generous nature to provide? Jesus was not seduced by the temptation, but trusted God’s providing, even if it was not at that particular time.

In the second temptation, as the devil takes Jesus to the highest pinnacle of the temple and suggests that he throw himself off so that the angels can catch him, Jesus again responds with a passage from Deuteronomy 6. An action to test God is just that. Showy miracles without a depth of relationship with God do not reveal the heart of God who seeks to live in relationship with God’s people. Jesus performs miracles in the Gospels, but they are not to prove or to show, but to transform and renew people and to fill certain human needs.

Finally, a third time, Jesus is tempted. “Look, the world, all this can be yours, the devil tempts Jesus, if Jesus will worship the devil.” In the 1st century, the Roman Empire consumed much of the known world. The kingdom, the dominance of Rome upon much of the world impacted the writer of Matthew. The Roman Empire was not the kingdom of God. The challenge of many in Jesus’ day was the decision to go along to get along, or to resist the empire. Which would it be? It was tempting to just go along, to allow the powers that be to dictate rather than to resist. In that context, this temptation became personal again for the readers of Matthew. And again, Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6. Jesus, by defining “Son of God” not by privilege or power but by obedience to God, has begun his journey to the cross. Tempted, Jesus resisted and walked the path that led to his confrontation with the powers of the world and the principalities and was condemned to die. His obedience and faithfulness to God prevailed, even as it cost him his life.

This text, on this First Sunday in Lent reveals to us the tension of this world in which we find ourselves. We often speak of the Lenten journey as a journey in the wilderness that we make, trekking through the challenges and obstacles that trip us up. Jesus wandered in the wilderness, tempted, challenged. How are you also aware of the temptations and challenges facing you in these days?

A friend wrote recently in a blog about bringing her two year old son to Ash Wednesday worship. She wrote that although he was busy during most of the service, when it was time for the imposition of ashes he came forward with her and everyone else and knelt down at the altar. The pastor came by and marked the sign of the cross on his forehead and said “sweet Angel, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”. My friend wrote, he gazed at the pastor and then watched as the pastor marked my friend with the ashes on her forehead. She said her eyes filled with tears with the realization that this was the first time that ashes had touched this little boy's forehead and that she was reminded again of his mortality. She commented that when she was pregnant with her oldest son who's now almost 10 she remembers thinking at some point that in the midst of a swollen belly, she was bringing a child into the world who would die. She had a moment of awareness that instead of thinking about the joy of a baby, tiny feet and fingers, toys and lullabies, she had a realization that she was bringing this new life into the world and that this child was as some point going to die. She felt another wave of that grief during the service on Wednesday.

Grief, loss, the brokenness of this world, temptations and the reality of our human existence break through in this season of Lent and hit us as we ponder this text from Matthew’s gospel. From the starkness of the ashes on our foreheads on Wed. to the journey in the wilderness of Lent in these coming weeks, to joining the crowds at the cries to crucify Jesus, we in the Christian community are called by the Gospel to see the suffering of the world and to ponder our own brokenness. This season of Lent invites us into the humanness of our Christian community and into the barrenness of the landscape of our own lives.

There is a loneliness and sense of confusion that many are experiencing these days. As we have come through this time of covid and shifts in the world as we know it, many of us feel unsettled and disoriented. Life is not like it had been. It looks familiar, on the surface, but it doesn’t take long to dig a bit to see that there is an anxiety and restlessness in our world. From the war in Ukraine to the divided political landscape, to the repeated events of mass shootings, we are and have already been in a Lenten season.

Here is the good news for you. God loves you. God knows and loves you as you are. God loves you even in the midst of this world that feels unsettled and in which we feel disoriented. In this Lenten time, in which we are reminded of the temptations and all that draws us away from God, (remember that Luther wrote that it is the devil, the world and our sinful selves that draw us away from God) you are being called into a new and renewed relationship with the one who loves you. I drove by a small store in town the other day and saw a small neon sign in the window that said, “Practice kindness always.” That felt like an invitation to me. Yes, practice kindness always. Maybe in the midst of the stresses and tensions, we could join together in the practice of extending grace as it has been given – by practicing kindness, always. And I like the notion of thinking of it as “practice”. Practicing is living out a skill or talent in a repeatable and conscious way. To practice is to know that one can keep on working on the skill to improve. Even the best athletes practice, even the best musicians practice. We are not being asked to have it all together all the time, but giving ourselves intentional times to practice kindness leads to kindness. The model of Jesus was to empty himself, to not make it about himself, to give of himself, over and over.

This Christian journey is also about our own self-giving, self-emptying love and compassion. Practicing kindness is a form of giving of the self, not in order to receive, but in order to give and share. It is Christ-like love in action. And it is in losing and giving of ourselves that Jesus promises you life and new life. Amen.