

A Lent 1 2.26.23

Matthew 4:1-11

Focus Statement: You do you; God's got the rest.

Apropos of this week's weather, I heard a story on NPR this week about a woman in the 70s who had a tree fall on her house during a thunderstorm. She couldn't get any financial support for the incident, since it was deemed "an act of God," so she decided her only course of action was to sue God. I have no idea how she found a lawyer willing to represent her and a court to hear the case, but somehow she did. God, probably not surprisingly, did not respond to the summons. At this point in the story, the reporter made a, I have to say, pretty funny theological quip about omnipresence, jokes about omnipresence not being regular parts of radio humor, my nerdy theological self really enjoyed this whole interaction, but I digress. Anyway, because the defendant failed to appear, the woman was awarded \$100,000 in damages. No word on if she ever managed to collect on that payment, but I'm guessing probably not.

I heard that story and—radio joke about omnipresence notwithstanding—I thought, what a pointless exercise, to sue God for damages. God is obviously not showing up in a courtroom as the defendant, even less so is God writing a check for damages. Who does God bank with? Does God have insurance? Does God have an attorney on retainer, or does God represent Godself?

Clearly this story led me down quite the legal rabbit hole and I got a bit judgmental about it. But when I stepped back and thought about it, it occurred to me, in a less concrete way, and maybe with less court fees, isn't this how we often approach God? Because at the heart of

the matter, suing God for damages is about trying to take control of an uncontrollable situation. It is about trying to find someone to blame for tragedy, someone whose fault it is for whatever has occurred. God is frequently a prime target for such ire. I remember when the earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, there was a certain segment of Christianity that claimed Haiti suffered so much because God was punishing the nation for practicing Voodoo. But it's not always God, sometimes we blame each other. I heard a statistic recently that difference in increase in the national debt between when Democrats are in control of the country and Republicans is so close as to be statistically insignificant. But ask either side who is driving that amount up and they are quick to point the finger at each other. It is so much easier to blame someone else than it is to try and find a solution.

Our Gospel reading for today is the devil trying to play on that very human experience, the need for control. The text tells us that "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Which, let's just pause right at that opening verse and notice something. You may not remember because it was January that we read it, but Matthew chapter three is the baptism of Jesus. Remember Jesus coming out of the Jordan River, and the heavens opening, and the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaiming, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"? Today's reading is the very next thing that happens, the same Spirit of God leads Jesus into the wilderness. Which tells us something crucial about this time of temptation, Jesus did not face it alone. The Spirit, the Spirit who was with him when he heard his identity boomed from the cloud, that same Spirit stands beside him. It's easy as we get into the meat of the narrative to lose

sight of that piece, but hold onto that. Even Jesus wasn't staring down the devil by himself, the Spirit was with him.

Once they were in the wilderness, temptation did not happen right away. The text goes on to tell us that prior to the devil's appearance, Jesus "fasted forty days and forty nights, and he was famished." Right here, I feel like Jesus earns himself a pass. I am certainly not at my best when I am hungry. Travis will tell you, I'm not an angry hungry person, I lean more towards confused. If I cannot seem to be able to make a decision, chances are good what I really need is a snack. But, here is why Jesus is Jesus and I am not, Jesus does just fine with all the devil presents to him.

Speaking of food, the very first temptation the devil presented to Jesus was bread.

"Command these stones to become loaves of bread." Followed up, basically, by the offer of fame. Throw yourself down from this high place, the angels will catch you. And finally, power. "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." One of the commentaries I was reading pointed out that all of these temptations are things Jesus himself will later do. He will feed five thousand, not with stones, but with five loaves and two fish. He will perform countless miracles. By the very nature of being the Son of God, he already has all the kingdoms of the world under his orbit. It's not the things themselves that the devil is offering that are the problem, it is what the taking of those things implies, the way in which they are being obtained. Jesus didn't fall victim to the devil's temptations because he could see the whole picture, the way God was moving through all of creation, and it allowed him to see past the thing that was right in front of him.

I found incredible wisdom around this question, in all places, in a quote from pop artist Taylor Swift. Last spring, Swift gave a commencement speech at New York University, where she told the graduates, “Decide what is yours to hold and let the rest go. Oftentimes, the good things in your life are lighter anyway.” The article I was reading that quoted Swift went on to posit, “Perhaps what looks impossible to us—a starving Jesus refusing to turn stones into bread—is something that Jesus was able to let go because he knew what was his to hold.”

This, I will be the first to tell you, I’m well aware is way easier to say than it is to do, but what if the reason Jesus was able to resist temptation was because he trusted that if he stayed the course, stayed in his lane, and did his part and only his part, the kingdom of God would unfold as it was supposed to? And, in a more relatable example, what might it look like for us to do the same? To return to our friend with a tree on her house from the start of the sermon, what help might she have found, support might have existed, friends might have been out there, if she hadn’t rushed to sue God. Which, as was discussed, didn’t work out anyway since God rarely, if ever, pays up in the way we ask God to.

Last week, Laurie pointed out the salt shaker banner on the wall and invited us to consider what it means that, actually in just a few chapters from where we are in Matthew’s Gospel this morning, Jesus calls us to be salt of the earth. Salt is a great metaphor for this text as well, because when salt does its job you don’t notice it much. If salt is grappling for control of the dish, the dish is well, salty and not very good. But when salt does its part, every

other flavor pops. Dear people of God, as we go through this forty day journey together, and larger than that, as we go through this journey of our lives in the kingdom of God, may this passage empower and encourage us to keep our eyes on what God is already doing. To do our part and trust that God is in the rest. Thanks be to God. Amen.