

A Lent 1 3.1.20

Matthew 4:1-11

Focus Statement: Jesus has this, and us.

Since it's the first Sunday of this new season I want to spend some time this morning stage setting where we are and where we're going. First off, you may have noticed something missing from worship today. Namely, three of the four texts listed in the bulletin last week as "texts for next week." I have to tell you, we, I, didn't make the decision to leave them out of the service lightly. In fact, I'm going to continue to print them each week and I really commend them to you as excellent devotional reading on your own, because by leaving them out, we're missing out on some of my favorite Old Testament and Romans readings. If you read my Trumpet article for this month, you know it was entirely dedicated to one of the left-out readings, the story of the dry bones from Ezekiel. But, in the end we did decide to go with just the Gospel reading during worship for a couple of reasons. One purely pragmatic, the Gospel readings are going to get rather long. Matthew's version of the temptation of Jesus is the longest of all four Gospels, and this was the shortest Gospel reading we'll have this season. By the fifth Sunday Lent we will read just about the entirety of John chapter 11. From a purely practical sense, there is the question of how much reading aloud we all are really able to process on a Sunday morning. But two, maybe more than any other year, the Gospel readings for Year A take us on a specific journey. So hopefully immersing ourselves fully in one reading each Sunday will help us enter into the arc of this Lenten narrative.

Fun historical fact for you, the Year A texts are some of the most ancient lectionary readings from the season of Lent. Back in the very earliest days of the Christian movement,

our ancestors of the faith were reading these stories together in anticipation of Easter and to help new followers prepare for baptism. Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus are all stories of conversion, stories in which Jesus called people to a new life, a new purpose, a new way of being in the world. These stories invite us to pay attention to the “something different” that God is doing in the world through Jesus. In each of these stories, the person will be transformed by their relationship with Jesus, their life will be made new in a way they could never have imagined. And that new life will affect not only them, but their communities. Nicodemus will go from an uneasy nighttime visitor to one of only two men courageous enough to take part in the burial of Jesus. The woman at the well will call her whole town to come and see Jesus. The man born blind will stand up to the Pharisees. Lazarus and his sisters will throw a meal for Jesus and his disciples despite the very real threat such open association posed. These texts ground us in a Lent that is not about us preparing ourselves through proper fasting, prayers, or works of charity in order for God to redeem us on Easter, but a Lent that is about getting ready to be transformed by relationship with the One who will literally break through heaven and earth to be with us. Lent says, get ready dear people, for the curtain of the temple is about to be torn in two from top to bottom, just as the heavens were split as Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism, and new life is on its way.

But before we get there, we start here, where Lent always starts. With an account of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The literary reasoning behind this starting point is maybe obvious. Jesus was tempted for forty days, Lent is forty days. Jesus fasted,

those of us who gave up sweets have to walk through Meijer without giving in to the ever-growing array of Easter candy, potayto, potahto, right?

Obviously not. While I know why the lectionary committee always gives us the temptation story as the reading for the first Sunday in Lent, the risk of this “be like Jesus” comparison is pretty problematic. For one, Jesus is Jesus. Be a disciple of Jesus, follow in the model of Jesus, even do as Jesus taught are all good life examples. But “be like Jesus” is setting ourselves up for failure. When, after all, was the last time one of us walked on water, gave a blind person back their sight, or raised someone from the dead? If “be like Jesus” is the goal of a successful Lenten experience, friends, we can all just hang up the towel now, for there’s no point in trying.

“Be like Jesus” also underemphasizes what Jesus does in this passage. Jesus is not just resisting temptation like I might resist the urge to turn off my alarm and go back to sleep and actually get up and go to the gym in the morning for once. Fun fact, rather than continually failing at this temptation, I’ve actually just stopped trying and given into the fact that I am an evening runner. Some battles are not worth fighting...

This passage, like, I might be so bold as to argue, all of scripture, is not about us at all but about what God is doing. And what God is doing through Jesus in this passage is drawing a very clear line in the sand about who is calling the shots, who is in charge of Jesus’ ministry in heaven and on earth.

So let's scene set for a minute. In Epiphany we've been reading the Sermon on the Mount, which was Jesus' first major teaching at the beginning of his ministry. This is chapter four, so this is before that. Chapter three, if you'll flash back to the Baptism of Jesus back in January, is the first time we meet the adult Jesus, when he was baptized by John in the Jordan and, key in understanding today's passage, the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. Immediately following the Spirit's descending, like literally two verses later, comes this morning's opening verse about how "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted."

The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. I probably point this out every year because this detail is in every account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. And it's super important in understanding what's going on in this story because it reminds us of who is calling the shots. The devil didn't bring Jesus into the wilderness or come out and find Jesus while he was in the wilderness. Temptation didn't get foisted on Jesus like the Peeps that patrol the entrance to Meijer or whatever cruel programmer put Snooze and Off right next to each other on my phone's alarm screen. No, what is happening in this story is that God through the Holy Spirit led Jesus, and without delving too far into some defining the Trinity tangent, let's just note we've got all three parts of it right there, at the very beginning of Jesus ministry, right at the moment in which Jesus was declared the Beloved Son of God, to stake his claim against evil and say here and no further. This so-called temptation isn't even temptation with Jesus. Scholar Joy Jay Moore notes that this is a question of provision. The devil first invites Jesus to provide for himself. To which Jesus says, God provides. Then the devil says, ok, prove God's provision. Jesus responds, my faith doesn't require proof. Then

the devil tries, ok, well, how about I'll provide. To which Jesus is like, ok, enough of you talking now, this isn't about you, it is about God. Who God is, what God is doing. What we see here is Jesus right at the beginning of his ministry making it abundantly clear that what Jesus is doing is not an answer to the problem of sin or the power of evil, Jesus is the space before and after the question itself. The story of God is not: Adam did a bad thing so Jesus had to come and clean it up and make it right again. The story is "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The ending was set before the beginning, before the world began. The devil never had a chance in this temptation in the wilderness because the power of what Jesus was about to do had already rendered the devil powerless. This isn't one of those, we're reading it after it happened so we know the ending, things either. Like literally, even though the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ had not chronologically, in real earth time happened yet, such was, is, and will be the power of that act that its effect is already being felt at the point in which the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Where's Chloe and her space-time continuum, that's the thing that's happening here.

And so, dear people of God, as we enter into this Lenten journey let us go with this absolute conviction. We don't know where we are going. We don't know where Jesus is calling us, how he is transforming us, who he is shaping us to be. We know that this relationship with God will change us, we know that new life is the result, but what form that new life will take, and what death that life will bring us through first, we cannot begin to imagine. But we also know this. Jesus is unequivocally in control. Whatever we face, whatever challenges, adventures, fears, or peril, Jesus has it, and Jesus has us. So let us take this first

step forward into the mystery of Lent. Let us walk boldly into this wilderness knowing that we do not go alone and that the one who leads us is faithful. Amen.