

First Sunday in Lent-February 26, 2023

Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction to the season and themes for the day: What if we thought of Lent as more about “leaning in” to the realm of God and less about ‘giving up’ something? When Jesus is tempted, he leans in to the long and arduous work of God...he says no to temptations because they’re really just short cuts and gimmicks. Looking at what Jesus says no to leads us to see what he has already said yes to... God’s agenda for the world and how Jesus embodies God’s love and passion for the world.

Preview: What are you giving up for Lent? Please don’t ask me to forsake chocolate or coffee...A friend of mine likes to suggest that Lent is a season for adding rather than taking away. As the preacher and writer Dianna Butler Bass puts it, Lent is more about re-construction than de-construction. This is a season of following a God’s path for restoration, healing, and shalom. If we give up anything, maybe set aside anything that clutters the way for God’s love to be embodied in the world.

The Gospel Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted 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.’” 5Then 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.’” 8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; 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.’”

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

SERMON:

The word “existential” might be overused these days. Yet...the word fits what’s really at stake in the wilderness. Jesus’ identity is challenged, his mission questioned, and the tempter tries to fob off a cheap—short cut-laden parody of the life giving, life affirming reign of God.

Not long before Jesus goes to the wilderness he was baptized and God’s Spirit rested on him and God announces that Jesus is God’s beloved; the chosen one. Now in the wilderness Jesus struggles with what being God’s chosen will look like. At his most vulnerable, Jesus faces the temptations that come.

The tempter picks at Jesus’ sense of identity—‘being the Son of God and all...the syntax is clearly if/then and an attempt to goad Jesus into proving a point. The temptations promising easy prosperity, public adoration and world domination sound more like the trappings of the Roman empire than they do the realm of God.

The nature of the temptations are transactional (another popular word these days). “Do this and you will get that”.

A Bible expert and podcaster offers a wry comment that the tempter sounds like the worst church mission consultant ever. The church is in a wilderness, Dr. Matt Skinner says. We’re vulnerable in this unknown place. We don’t know what to do now days. So, we’re tempted to go for the quick fixes, the showy stand on the pinnacle spectacle, and sometimes Christians forget their core identity as they seek to dictate public policy for everyone else. If we adopt the magic program, our attendance will swell and our budgets will balance, we’re told. The temptations rely on our forgetfulness of God’s faithfulness.

Jesus knows who he is; and he spells it out drawing upon the ancient faith of his people. He rejects the gimmickry and quick fixes in favour of claiming his identity as one who depends on God. He takes us from the transactional to the relational....God creates

and provides. God is not to be tempted or treated like a vending machine or errand runner...The passionate faithful God alone is worthy of our allegiance.

Our response to Jesus' wilderness struggle isn't to wave the score card for Jesus. We can sharpen our awareness of the parodies of good...which in fact often twist the good into something dehumanizing and evil. We can also do as the preacher Karoline Lewis suggests...we can "lean in" to the realm of God—a realm of justice, mercy, and well being for everyone. Leaning in means remembering who we are and whose we are...the remembering shifts our syntax from if/then to since/ therefore....Since we too are God's children, created in God's image and since we are baptized into the life of Christ, therefore we are free to live loving, imaginative, and generous lives for the sake of this world God so loves. Amen.