

1 Lent – March 9, 2014 – Peace, West Seattle

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11 – “Not by bread alone”

Even if you weren't able to be here for the service on Ash Wednesday, you can tell from the purple on the altar and on the pastor and from the change in tone in the hymns that we have begun a new season in the church year, the season we call Lent. The word “Lent” simply means spring, but from very early in the church's history the days or weeks before the celebration of Easter have been set aside as a period of preparation. This was first of all a time of intensive instruction for those who were hoping to be baptized at Easter and secondarily, a time for the whole Christian community to renew their commitment to the life that they had entered in baptism. The questions that are asked of those who want to be baptized haven't changed over the centuries. The first question is, “Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil and all his empty promises?” The second question, usually answered with the Apostles Creed, is “Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty? In Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord? In the Holy Spirit?” It is no wonder, then, that as we begin this time of preparation, our readings are about two key encounters with the power of evil.

Our first lesson, the story from Genesis 2 and 3 is not a piece of history, but an old story that is full of wisdom, a symbolic story about human beings and their relationship with each other, with God and with the earth. There is enough in this story for several sermons, so let's just note a couple of critical points. First of all, the power of evil, represented here by the serpent, always lies. Evil has to lie because evil has nothing positive to give to human beings. If the serpent had presented his suggestion in the spirit of full disclosure, if he'd laid all his cards on the table, he would have said, “Listen, Lady, just pick one of those yummy fruits from that tree over there and share it with your husband and your whole life will change. You'll get thrown out of this nice garden, you and your husband will start to distrust each other and hide parts of yourselves from each other, having babies will be way more painful for you, your husband will have to work like a dog to provide enough for your family to eat and your relationship with God will be seriously damaged.” Now if the suggestion had been put to the woman in this

way, she would have said, "Listen snake, you are nothing but trouble. Get out of here, go take a hike." Evil can only make itself attractive by lying to us, by making us think we are choosing something good or at least, better.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew we have another encounter with the power of evil. Jesus has just been baptized. Jesus has seen the Spirit of God has descending like a dove, alighting on him and heard the voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And in the next verse that very same Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted or tested by the devil, by the power of evil. (Now, if when I say "devil" you get a "pop up" of a cartoon character in a red suit with horns and a tail, try to set that aside. We are talking about real evil here, that always comes in disguise. If it helps to imagine this as a struggle within Jesus, that's ok, too.)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "I is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

The Spirit drives Jesus out into a wilderness not like our beautiful wilderness. This wilderness is rocky, dry and barren. There's nothing to enjoy or to distract you and that's just the point. Here in the silence and emptiness, with no one to depend on except God, Jesus needs to face everything that is within himself and to get clear on who He is, on what is at stake. (He's alone, he's hungry and he's vulnerable.) It is the perfect time for the devil to make his move. And he doesn't tempt Jesus to commit this or that sin; he doesn't propose anything that on the surface appears to be sinful

Since Jesus is clearly a person who is serious about his faith, the devil uses an approach that seems both reasonable and religious. "So you're the Son of God, Jesus. Well, what do you think that means? Rank must have some privileges, don't you think? Couldn't it mean that you can bypass some of the inconveniences of being human like hunger and

cold, fear and fatigue and loneliness? Since you are the Son of God, why don't you use that power? Why should you be hungry? Tell the stones to become bread."

There's nothing obviously bad about what the devil suggests. Nor is the approach of evil obviously wicked. There's no attack here but an attempt to convince Jesus to entertain the possibility of a little course correction. It is as if the devil is trying to slip the thinnest knife between Jesus and God. It is not a frontal, physical attack, an obvious battle, but it is a battle nonetheless. Evil's attempt is to convince Jesus, to turn his will in another direction that will distract Him from discerning his mission and manipulate him away from God's kingdom toward the way of the world.

Notice that while the devil insists on emphasizing Jesus' status as the Son of God, Jesus insists on his humanity. "Human beings do not live by bread alone..." The word of God to human beings is God's word to him. He needs to be nourished by the word of God as much as he needs the nourishment of bread.

The devil doesn't argue with Jesus, but noting Jesus' devotion to the word of God, he uses some verses from Psalm 91 to introduce the next temptation:

6... "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. Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

This is another attempt to come between God and Jesus, and attempt, in fact, to get Jesus to try manipulate God in the same way that the devil is trying to manipulate Jesus. To jump off the pinnacle of the temple would be a stupid stunt, with no purpose but to create a reputation for Jesus, but it is not necessarily an evil act. But to jump off the temple in order to test God is already to step outside of the trusting relationship that Jesus has with God and to start playing games. But Jesus doesn't want or need to play those games: "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Finally, the devil is desperate to get this job done and he cuts to the chase. It is as if he spreads out the whole Roman empire before Jesus and say, "Look, it's all very simple. (This is a deal you can't refuse.) You can have Caesar's job and think of all the good you could do. This is a shortcut to glory. All you've got to do is fall down and worship me." But Jesus is sharp enough to know that the devil's promise is a lie. The devil promises what he can't deliver. The kingdoms of this world are not the devil's to give.

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

Jesus' trust in God is not misplaced. What the devil encourages Jesus to secure by his own power, God now supplies.

And what does all this have to do with us? One thing that is clear is that if we intend to keep Lent in even the smallest way, the world we live in is not going to give us much help. With all our phones and pads and tablets ringing, beeping and chirping to demand our attention, it is really hard to find any time or space for silence and reflection. Maybe the call of Lent to wilderness, to silence and reflection is just too countercultural for our times....and then again, maybe not.

Last year early in the morning, Pastor Gretchen Mertes of Luther's Table took Ash Wednesday on the road. She walked the two blocks to the Renton Transit Center and gave anyone who wanted it the opportunity to be marked with ashes. She was amazed at how many people accepted the invitation to be told, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Now that's not the gospel yet, that's just the bare truth about what it means to be a human being. But underneath our culture's frantic busyness, underneath our society's denial of death, people have a hunger for the truth, a longing to consider what it is that gives life meaning.

"Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil and all his empty promises?" There is evil that we can clearly recognize as such, but there is much that would distract us from God that comes to us in disguise. Lent is an invitation to make space to consider the direction of your life, space to discern the subtle suggestion that turns the will away

from its goal. Finding space to make the most of Lent in this noisy, hectic world is probably going to take some effort, but it is worth the struggle. At baptism God says to each of us, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter." This is an assurance that we should never forget, a promise that should continue to give us strength and courage. And yet, the glorious promise of baptism brings us into conflict with every person and power that would replace or diminish the place of God in our lives. The promise of baptism brings us into conflict with those parts of ourselves that still fight against God and resist God. This is a tough and ongoing battle, one that we can't win through our own strength.

But God has provided us with resources and the first of these is the example of Jesus. Jesus is doing what God's people so often failed to do and in so doing, He is showing us that it is possible for human beings to live this way. In fact, the closeness that Jesus has with God is the closeness that God always intended for human beings, the closeness that God intends for you and for me.

God has provided the resources of scripture. Drawing on verses that He knows by heart from Deuteronomy, Jesus refuses the devil's attempts to interfere with his trusting relationship with God. He doesn't take any easy, supernatural way out, but relies only on the resources that are available to you and me.

Finally, God has given us each other, the experience and wisdom of the people of Peace Lutheran and of the church throughout the ages to encourage each other along the way. The better we know those who have walked this same road, the more we grow into patience with ourselves, trust in God and strength for the journey. Amen