

Discerning Choice

Psalm 32 • Blessed are those whose sins are forgiven.

Matthew 4:1-11 • Jesus tempted in the desert.

The story of Jesus being tempted in the desert is one that both inspires us and challenges us. It challenges us to consider whether we can be as strong as Jesus when faced with a choice. That we either trust in God or we are trying to satisfy our own human desires. The wilderness is truly a place of struggle. A place to wrestle with one's inner demons or inner doubts, the burdens that each of us carry. It's also a place to reach out to God, to seek forgiveness, grace, and unconditional love. Temptation as defined by the Merriam-Webster's dictionary is to entice or to do wrong by promise of pleasure or gain. Jesus when he went into the wilderness was tempted. Enticed by the devil to seek power in three very different ways according to Douglas Hall. Douglas Hall suggests the following that there were three variations. The first variation is the temptation to attempt the miraculous perform a miracle Jesus turn these stones into bread so that you are no longer hungry. Act as if you have the power of God. Secondly, it's the temptation for a spectacle. From this high point, on this Holy city, I invite you to throw yourself off and test God. Let God save you from hurting yourself. Testing God. The third temptation is one for political power. The devil says I will give you all the kingdoms of the Earth if you will worship me the devil instead. Third temptation to seek power and turn away from God.¹

How often do we fall to the Allure of power of making a deal with God or turning away from God in favor of our own wants and desires. This is truly Human Nature. If we look at Adam and Eve in the garden it started right from there where they were tempted by the things that they could not have. I remember this feeling so clearly at the beginning of the pandemic when I was told, um, rightly so, to pack up my stuff and go home and to stay there. And my instant reaction was say no. And to rebel and to not do that. I also remember as a child being in a store and seeing signs that say do not touch. And it took every ounce of my energy not to touch whatever it was I wasn't supposed to or don't push that button. Inevitably I would. I can even remember as a teenager walking through school halls where you see those fire bell things and extinguishers and, and just fighting with myself wanting to just, just to see what it would be like, just to pull it once. I did refrain from that one. Ahh, there are so many temptations. These are just a few. Almost frivolous ones.

¹ Douglas Hall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 46

Religious institutions also fall to the Allure of power. Where religious institutions cast judgement on others. Assuming that we know what is best for people. Look at the harm that was done through residential schools or the racism that has existed in the church. Or the harm done to people of the 2SILGBTQ community. How often have we even found ourselves telling people that what they are doing is wrong and that this is really the way it should be done. One Theologian writes:

Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgements when we make strangers or friends who make choices that we just don't understand. Temptation rules us making us able to look away from those in need. And to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth or power influence over others vanity or an inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in justification of little lies, small sins. A racist joke. A questionable business practice for the greater good. A criticism of a spouse or partner when they are not around.²

The season of Lent is often a season that people dislike because it calls us to places in our lives where we feel guilt and shame. Inadequacy, fear. But I would invite us to reframe the season instead into an invitation. An invitation to learn and grow. Reflect and discern. And become true disciples of God. We need to encourage each other to own up to our mistakes quickly. To seek forgiveness. To admit when we are wrong. For failure is actually an opportunity to learn and grow. Not something to hide or be ashamed of.

We can find hope in the words from the Psalmist today who wrote Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is covered. So why do we insist on holding on to mistakes and holding on to secrets that cause us so much pain and suffering. Why do we sit in silence with our bodies wasting away carrying the burden. Groaning and suffering alone with that deep ache in our bones. The Psalmist states that when he finally acknowledged his sin to God and no longer hid his burdens that he carried God forgave him and he was freed from his pain and suffering. God then became a place of rest, a place of comfort. A place to go where the person would no longer be tempted to do wrong.

In my ministry I've had several very powerful visits. Where I've truly experienced God's power of forgiveness. Journeying with people in time of, of great need and crisis provides you with some really amazing experiences. The very first one I remember, and I think I've shared the story once before, was a person who was dying of lung cancer. And when I went to visit it was evident that this person needed to let go of what was burdening them. They looked up at me in this very fragile way, straight in the eyes, need to confess. At the time I wasn't ordained and didn't feel that I had the power to help this person. But we went with it. And it's true I didn't

² Maryetta Anschutz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 48

have the power, God did. As this person laid out all the things that they were carrying that were hurting them and harming them and leaving them in such misery. As we said the words together, out to God. As I assured this person that God loved and forgave them. The person suddenly was released, and their body was at peace and a day later they passed away.

When we trust in God's love and when we turn to God we are given the strength to resist temptation. We are given the courage to seek forgiveness and work towards reconciliation. The United Church of Canada acknowledged our wrongdoing in creating residential schools. We named how we caused Indigenous people to suffer. We apologize. We ask for forgiveness, and we continue to learn from this mistake and seek to live God has called us to. In this month as we recognize and remember Black history, we as a church recommit ourselves to being an anti-racist Church. There's still so much more work to do. A member of this faith community rewrote the vows that one might take at Baptism and Confirmation, and I wanted to share it with you because I find it very powerful. They wrote desiring the accountability and responsibility to all my relations. I seek to resist evil and to live in love and justice. That is what we are being called to do together. So, for this season of Lent, we invite everyone to enter a practice of wisdom.

The virtues projects that we've been studying since September writes that wisdom is the guardian of our choices. It helps us to discern the right path at the right moment. It gives clarity of thought and deeper understanding. Wisdom takes us beyond thought to deeper knowing. And wisdom grounds us in grace. Wisdom is found when we ground ourselves in prayer. Wisdom comes when we listen deeply to others and learn from our past mistakes. Wisdom comes when we pause and reflect and consider, consider things carefully. Wisdom comes when we trust in God.

So, over the season, that's going to last for you know, a couple of weeks, six - seven weeks when we walk towards Jerusalem with Jesus and Palm Sunday. I hope and pray that we will listen to the wisdom found in the scriptures. May we listen to the wisdom of our spiritual friends here in this place. May we rely on one another to help each other resist those temptations and to offer love and forgiveness always. And may we lay our burdens down so that we have room. So that we can rejoice in God's love and the light that comes with Jesus who shines forth in this world. Go out into this world know that you are forgiven and loved. Amen.