

Highland Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Lent – February 26, 2023
“Waiting in the Wilderness”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Last week I attended a conference put on by the Presbyterian Board of Pensions called CREDO. These conferences are offered at the beginning of your pastoral career, the middle, and again at the end. So, I was supposed to attend this conference in March of 2020 when I did feel “newly ordained.” Three years and a lot of experience later, the conference felt a little different to everyone who attended. But, the purpose is to try and help pastors find healthier balances in their work and lives in order to prevent burnout or unhealthy coping strategies. The best part of this conference was that it took place at Ferncliff, which is a Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center outside of Little Rock, AR. Ferncliff is the second largest Presbyterian camp by acreage. Does anyone know what the largest Presbyterian camp is (by acreage)? Ghost Ranch. But while Ghost Ranch’s acreage is all wide-open high desert spaces, Ferncliff’s land is all wilderness. It’s full of beautiful, dense forests and tall, rolling hills. There was lots of wonderful hiking and opportunities to be in nature.

One experience that we were forced to participate in was a discernment experience where we were supposed to be in silence for an hour and a half. I cannot tell you the last time I sat in intentional silence for an hour and a half, but I can tell you it hasn’t happened in the last five years because I no longer live in a world where silence is a good thing. If there is more than five minutes of silence in my house it means someone is drawing on the walls or cutting their own hair somewhere. So, this experience for me was actually very challenging. I kept finding myself panicking and trying to fill the silence. I kept being tempted to look at my phone, engage in social media, send emails or texts, be productive...

This is not unlike what we are called to do during the season of Lent. While we are encouraged during Lent to deepen our commitments to faithful living, Lent calls us to focus not on what we are doing but to focus on Jesus. The idea of fasting in Lent is to be able to get rid of some of the distractions that are pulling our minds away from Jesus and be able to breathe deeper and focus more clearly on the task at hand: reminding ourselves why we follow Jesus and what his death and resurrection actually means to our human experience on earth.

The point of this scripture in Matthew is not that we ought to take on the same fast that Jesus did in the wilderness or that we should focus on how Jesus was strong enough to say no to the tempter despite what was being offered. The point of this scripture for Matthew, and why it comes directly after the story of Jesus’s baptism, is that it is answering questions about Jesus’s identity.

The Tempter confronts Jesus with the opportunity to differentiate himself from what is not life-giving. By denying the extravagances he could have, he articulates the parameters around who God is. In other words, what is truly life-giving resides inside certain boundaries. It

doesn't feed itself at the expense of others. What gives true life does not take a short-cut to wisdom or grasp for power.

We know Jesus' identity is the matter at hand because the offering the Tempter puts to him is a kind of snotty challenge: "If you are the Son of God ..." The story doesn't tell us how the knowledge of Jesus's identity came to the Tempter. It is an assumption in the narrative. The Tempter just shows up there in the wilderness and immediately begins to try and find a weakness in God's Son.

To make food appear when one is famished is a primary hunger, as it were. To let go of one's sensibilities in a situation where falling from a great height means death would be to abandon deep reading of God's word by taking it literally. To take power over others feeds the ego. So, food, simplistic thinking, and self-importance are what is at stake here. But Jesus sees through the attempted traps. He will not let the Tempter make him give up his self for the sake of appeasing his physical desires, his hunger. He will not let the Tempter narrow his understanding of God's word so that it becomes a litmus test for faith. He will not yearn for or grab influence in the way of human beings who find themselves unsatisfied unless they have status that is admired by other humans. Jesus will not yearn primarily to be given what feeds the physical body or hunger to know fully what God's word means or grab importance.

The result of these denials is that "angels" visit Jesus in verse 11. I imagine them doting on him as a parent when a child recovers from a dangerous illness or has been lost and is suddenly found. They wait on him, which means they have an eye for his needs and are ready to provide whatever that is. They are from God as messengers who come because Jesus is recognized through his refusals as one who is devoted to truth and goodness.

The question now becomes how we are to understand these denials in our own lives. If I find myself moved to avoid physical pleasures or to keep myself from latching onto a superficial understanding of God's truth or stop myself from giving in to my desire to be well regarded by others, how do those angels manifest for me?

The answer that came to me was thinking of the relief I feel when I have stopped striving after something too hard to achieve, when I remember to let it be enough in my life that I am a beloved child of God just as Jesus was addressed by the voice that named him Beloved. Or maybe we recognize how good it feels to know our own strength when we turn away from a damaging pattern of behavior. It's important for us to remember how much more interesting searching can be when we keep asking why instead of settling for an easy and widely approved interpretation of something.

Today, we also heard of the temptation of the snake's apple because what happens to Jesus in his encounter with the Tempter is an elaborate additional description of how the knowledge of good and evil can twist our minds and hearts—how stuck we are each day with the Tempter in the guise of a snake and an apple. In this Genesis passage, the serpent sows the seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that is at the core of

being human - not through their relationship with God - but by seizing the fruit that is in front of them. It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own, that seduces the first humans.

The challenge for us in this Lenten season is to be comfortable with silence, to be comfortable with waiting, and to be comfortable with who we are. We have a long 40 days of waiting in the wilderness. What are we going to do with that time so that we more fully understand ourselves as beloved children of God? Who we were created to be is exactly who we are supposed to be. And that's enough. This waiting time is the time to recognize that the temptation to be self-sufficient, to find easy answers, or gain power or importance, is strong. Everything in our society is telling (sometimes shouting at us) that these things are important. It's a lot harder to hear God's still, small voice telling us that we are enough. But the need for silence, deep breathing, exploration and waiting in the wilderness happens because we have to figure out how to block out the loud noises and live into the silence.

Sometimes we don't recognize that a large part of being human is being aware that we are insufficient, that we are not complete in and of ourselves, that lacking is a permanent part of our condition. It can be uncomfortable to recognize that to be human is to be aware that we carry inside ourselves a hole, an emptiness that we will always be restless to fill. How do we rest into the restlessness?

This week on Ash Wednesday, we were reminded of our mortality and the fact that we both matter immensely and not at all. It's such an odd juxtaposition to remember that we are made out of rich top-soil that God cares about so deeply, and that our lives are fragile and can flash by us in an instant. Once we recognize that the only thing that matters is living deeply into being comfortable as a beloved child of God, it can become easier to know how to be in this world. So let us spend time in the wilderness, let us let go of expectations, let us just "be," let us embrace waiting and silence, let us quiet the other things that want our attention, and let us just love what it means to be human, to be made of dirt and so deeply cared for. That is our Lenten call: to rest into who we are. Let it be so. Amen.