



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

MINISTER
DAN YEAZEL, PREACHING
KIM JOHNSON

First Sunday in Lent
February 10, 2008

Matthew 4:1-11

Bear You Up

Intro: Our New Testament lesson is from Matthew. Jesus has been baptized by John, he has been sent out to the wilderness by the Spirit of God and now he comes to a time of testing and temptation. This is a defining moment just before he will begin his ministry. Let us listen for God's word as it comes through Matthew's words.

I love the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. I was reading from an old Calvin and Hobbes book the other day and took a particular delight from the first page. In the very first Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, Calvin's dad is working on the car. This little kid Calvin walks up in a safari hat and says, "So long, Pop! I'm off to check my tiger trap! I rigged a tuna fish sandwich yesterday, so I'm sure to have a tiger by now!" His dad replies, "They like tuna fish, huh?" As Calvin walks off, he says, "Tigers will do anything for a tuna fish sandwich!" The final frame shows Hobbes (the tiger), hanging by his foot from a tree, munching on a tuna fish sandwich. He says to no one in particular, "We're kind of stupid that way."

Each day we are tempted to be less than God created us to be - Every time we choose what is easiest without thinking about how much more is possible - Whenever we take tuna fish when we could do better - We too can say "We're kind of stupid that way."

Our society scoffs at temptation. Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything but temptation" and "the easiest way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it." Temptation is trivialized because we believe ourselves self-sufficient. We decide what's best for us. We trivialize sin when we think of it as merely an error in judgment. "Oops, I won't do that again!" Sin is rejecting God's hopes for us. We think of temptation as the

acceptance of evil when it is far more often the rejection of courageous good. We are so used to choosing what is easiest that becoming what God wants us to be doesn't even seem like an option.

But it is always possible to be true to God's calling. A few weeks ago we read the scripture of Jesus being baptized in the muddy waters of the Jordan. The voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my son, my beloved, in you I am well pleased." Jesus is then flung out into the wilderness, into the middle of nowhere to decide what kind of son he is going to be. The wilderness is hot and barren. The hills are dust heaps. The rocks are jagged. The wind howls at night. Here even the sea is called "dead." Jesus was too weighed down with the burden of choosing the direction for his life to even think of food. It has been days, weeks since he has eaten. And in one of the great understatement in all of scripture, Matthew writes, "and after 40 days, he hungered."

From somewhere comes a voice, a whisper, a screaming whisper: "If you are God's Son, command this stone, so that it becomes bread." And Jesus remembers John, the Jordan River, the sky opening and a voice thundering, "You are my son, the beloved." Now a different voice, "If you are God's son, if you are God's son." The words echo, "Stones into bread, stones into bread."

Jesus was the first person tempted by fast food. A rounded stone becomes a loaf of pumpernickel, a boulder - a nice bagel. Who will be hurt? If he is God's child, then why shouldn't he have what he wants? The temptation is to turn from the way of sacrifice.

We struggle with the lure of doing what is easiest. This first temptation is to sacrifice what is eternally best for what is momentarily satisfying. We search for the easy life. We dream of the power ball that will get us the house on easy street. We end up hungry for the wrong things. The life focused on food or sex or play or pleasure is a life spent looking for substitutes for communion with God.

We are tempted to avoid hard parts like forgiveness. Somebody tells your boss that you were rude. It isn't true, but if they were going to say that you were rude you would have liked the pleasure of actually having been rude. The mechanic you paid to install shock absorbers says the new rattle is unrelated. It seems quite a coincidence. We should forgive, but it's a hard part of following, we'd rather get mad or better yet - get even. Every time we choose what seems the easiest path, we become less. Jesus understood the temptation of the easy way he says: "One cannot live by bread alone. Obedience is more important than comfort."

The devil tries again like a con man with an arm covered with Rolexes. This time it is from the highest point on the temple roof: "If you are God's son, throw yourself down. You know what the Bible says, 'God will protect you.'" Shakespeare pointed out, "There is no error so grave but that some sober brow will not bless it with a proper text." Even the Tempter quotes scripture.

The first century Jews believed that when the Messiah came, he would reveal himself from the temple roof. Jesus could be the Messiah the people wanted. He could be a religious leader, hero, and teacher without the hard parts. Jesus could have modified his ministry and been what they wanted. Jesus could have been the kind of religious leader people respected and expected.

For many there is the temptation to "look" spiritual but to "do" otherwise. The temptation is to keep up a Christian appearance even as we lower our expectations of what we can be for God. We slowly but surely choose comfort over concern, success over sacrifice, respectability over love.

A third time the screaming whisper returns with palaces and kingdoms: "Compromise and it's all yours." To worship the tempter is to choose the weapons of status. Jesus could have chosen success. This temptation is to

seek prominence. To bow down to the devil is to choose the path of wealth instead of redemptive suffering. The Evil One appears for us not in a readily identifiable red suit with a pitchfork. The tempter appears as a sensible way to meet our needs, it can be that desire for a little bigger house, a little more in savings, and a little better job. When we desire success for our own sakes, we push ourselves away from God. But through dry and hungry lips, Jesus answered the master counterfeiter, "Bow down to God alone, and worship only God."

The adversary retreated temporarily, but "he'll be back." Jesus was continually tempted to make life easier for himself, but he kept foregoing comfort, applause, and wealth to be true. There was never freedom from temptation for Jesus, and there won't be for us, either. The temptations Jesus felt are the same temptations we face each day. We must continually choose between compromise and the gospel.

Why do we so consistently give in to temptation? We give in because we forget. Jesus' antidote for temptation was remembering. Jesus responds with the words of the Hebrew Scriptures. He remembered how God had worked in the past, and believes that God would walk with us all into the future. We must remember the stories of what God has

done and know that God acts here and now as we write our stories.

We need to remember this story of Jesus in the desert. There were no witnesses to this event but Christ. Jesus must have told the disciples in the hope that they would remember. Remember that we have a Savior who lived beyond comfort, praise, and affluence. Jesus understands our struggle to be authentic.

Most of all, we are to remember whose we are. The voice at Jesus' baptism was the voice of assurance: "This is my beloved son." God has assured us that we too are God's children. Whenever Martin Luther was confronted with temptation, he would walk around with his hand on his head and shout, "I have been baptized." He remembered whose child he was. We have to remember whose we are too. That will bear us up through all things.

Many times we're not what we ought to be. We're stupid that way. But even in the midst of our longing for the paths of least resistance, we have a high calling and the help of God to live as God's children, created, flawed, tempted, and always loved. Amen.