

## “Tempted in the Wilderness”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 5, 2017  
First Sunday in Lent

Readings from Scripture: Romans 5:12-19 and Matthew 4:1-11

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.*

*But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*

*Romans 5:12-19*

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

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying 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."'*

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

*Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him,*

*'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
"Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him."'*

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

*Matthew 4:1-11*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that are within each of us, the words we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you have placed upon my trembling heart. Touch, bless and transform all of them into the living word of Jesus Christ and let that word do its work in our hearts and our minds, in our actions and in our words and in who we are together as the people of God. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

So there's nothing like preaching after Karen makes you cry! And I'm going to try not to do it again. That chair for me is a sacred object and a sacred place. It is where I get to worship God every week with you. I can remember in seminary some of my classmates lamenting that when they were doing their student teaching or student apprenticeship, that when they led worship, they weren't able to really worship God. They were too busy leading and figuring out what was next to be open to the Spirit. They were too worried about making a mistake to really lose themselves in what the Spirit was doing. And I can remember saying to myself privately that I hope I never get like that. It's hard for me to hold it together sitting in that chair when Bill lays it on real thick, because I feel it start to vibrate under me and it vibrates my soul as well.

I remember sitting in that chair, looking up in the balcony at a single TV camera on a day I wished I wasn't even alive, this place so packed with so many people, hearts shattered, the community in turmoil wondering what on earth had just happened. And how were we, a congregation so touched and affected by it, going to make it just one more step? I think about all the weddings and the memorial services and the celebrations of life, all the times that we've worshipped and sung and prayed, all the times that we've laughed and cried, and I'm thankful that we are able, at the end, to worship together and to have the Spirit do what the Spirit does best which is encourage us, comfort us, strengthen us, challenge us, and that we get to do that together. There are many times throughout the week when I come into this space and it's empty—at least it would look that way on the surface because there is no one else in it. I usually sit right at the cross section there and look at the windows and marvel at their beauty. I try to get your perspective, because from this chair things look quite different on a Sunday morning.

When I sit out there I see mystery and beauty. I see hope and wondering. I see aspirations for a better tomorrow. There are times when I sit here in this chair and I look out. I see the turmoil of the latest diagnosis written upon your face. I see the loss of a loved one etched forever in your forehead. And I see the pride when your children and your grandchildren sing. I wish I had ears, at times, to hear these walls talk, to share the story of the time when Dr. Stewart laid the cornerstone and all that has come and gone. I wonder what that story would be. And then I simply look around and I see all your faces (turns to the choir) and yours, occasionally. And I realized that what I learned last week while sitting in the deserted place in the desert of northwest New Mexico is

true—that we as the people of God carry the big story and that that big story can act as the balm of Gilead for whatever ails us.

In a sense in his temptations from the devil, Jesus is reciting the big story and because we are not a Jewish congregation hearing the Gospel of Matthew read as if a sermon is being delivered to us, we may not hear that big story. At the end of the third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has just been baptized, comes out of the water and hears the voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Then immediately he is ushered out into the wilderness and tempted by the devil. Forty days and 40 nights. If we were that Jewish congregation, our ears would be perked up, our hearts would be beating quickly and we'd go, (Gasp), what? The Exodus all over again? The people being led from bondage to freedom, through water, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, almost getting to the promised land? This is the big story that Jesus is embodying for us, not just in the gospel but in all of life—that the journey for us as a people of faith who trust in God is always from bondage to freedom. Whether it's bondage of a broken heart or the bondage of great joy. We are invited together always to march towards freedom.

In his temptations from the devil, as he wanders in the wilderness, Jesus reads, or remembers, or recites from Deuteronomy: *One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.* Jesus is embodying a message of hope for all people, that we can always overcome, and we can always take one more step. I partly wish that there were one more temptation in there. I wish the devil had sat down with Jesus and said, “What should we do? Should we live our lives only to take care of ourselves? Something like that?” Because I believe Jesus would have kept going in Deuteronomy and said these words: *Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you and so that you may go and occupy the good land that the Lord has given to your ancestors.* Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord so that it may go well with you. May it be so for all of us. Amen.