

Sermon on Matthew 4:1-11
First Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

The number 40 is one of the “magic numbers” in the Bible. Noah and his family endured 40 days and nights in the ark as the floodwaters rained down. For 40 days and nights Moses fasted on Mount Sinai as he received the words of God’s covenant with his people. For forty days and nights Elijah fasted in the desert before receiving a new commission from God. For 40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness before they could enter the Promised Land. For 40 days and nights Jesus fasted in the wilderness, driven by the Holy Spirit, following his baptism by John, in preparation for his mission. Some say that “life begins at 40”! I don’t know where that came from, but 40 is a special number, to be sure! Forty days is the number of days in the season of Lent, as we follow Jesus toward the cross, and the celebration of Easter. So this week we have begun the journey, starting with ashes on our foreheads in a sign of the cross, remembering that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. We are 4 days in (because we don’t count Sundays).

So, oddly enough, the first lesson today brings us back to the Creation, in the second chapter of Genesis, to Adam, whom God created from the dust of the ground. The meaning of the Hebrew word *adama* is “earth”, “soil” or “ground”, so the Creation story shows our deep human connection to the earth. We see this later in scripture, when Jeremiah speaks of God forming us “like a potter molds clay”. God first created human beings with freedom to live freely in the lush garden of the earth, called *Eden* – which means “delight”. (How am I doing so far, I ask our resident Hebrew scholar, Diane Jacobson? This is about as much Hebrew as I dare translate!)

Instead of fasting for 40 days in Creation, the man Adam is placed in this lush garden of every kind of fruit imaginable, good to eat. Except that God forbade Adam from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest he die. Seems clear enough. Then the story becomes more complicated. A woman was created as a partner for the man, made from his very flesh and bone.

And then the Serpent came upon the scene, craftier than any other animal. The serpent asked the woman “Did God say ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” “No, just from the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we shall not eat.”

But the serpent tested her, saying, “You will not die, for God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” They could not resist. The woman saw how delightful this fruit was to look

at, tasted it, and shared some with the man to eat. Then their eyes were opened, and they saw that they were naked, and so they covered themselves with fig leaves.

You know the rest of the story. The serpent had tricked the woman and the man into disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit. He had manipulated these poor naïve human beings into thinking God was not serious, that they wouldn't die by eating the fruit, and that if they ate from this tree that they would be like God! But it didn't work out that way. There were consequences: now all human beings would be mortal – they would die. Banished from the garden, Adam would now have to work to grow fruit to eat, and the woman would have pain in childbirth. We look back at this story as a parable of original sin, of our human fall from innocent bliss into a lifetime of sweat, toil and tears, and inevitable death. It also led to a lifetime pattern of men blaming women for our misfortune, without owning up to our own responsibilities. Thanks a lot, snake! (See? There we go again, blaming a serpent for our own sins!) The Apostle Paul is not much better, saying “*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.*” Adam's fall became a symbol for the sin of every human being, when we don't believe God or listen to God's warnings, and think we can do anything without consequences.

Fast forward a few thousand generations, and we see Jesus in a different kind of wilderness east of the Jordan, nothing like the paradise of Eden. But like Israel in the wilderness, Jesus' faith was tested by the devil. He was hungry after 40 days of fasting, and the devil tempted him by urging him to turn stones into bread (*if you are the Son of God*). He tempted Jesus to jump down from the highest pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem (*if you are the Son of God – for the angels would save him*). He even took Jesus to the top of the highest mountain, showed Jesus all the kingdoms of this world, which he would give him, if he fell down to worship him.

Jesus' answer? *You shall not live by bread alone, but from the Word of God. Do not put the Lord your God to the test. And Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.* Brilliant answers to tempting offers. But they were easy answers for Jesus, because Jesus knew who he was: the Beloved Son of God, identified as such on the day of his Baptism (and later, announced on the day of his Transfiguration on the mountain).

Adam failed in his test, because he was naïve, and wasn't sure who he was. Jesus withstood the devil's testing, because he knew who he was, and understood the false offers the devil made – he had no need to eat bread if he had God's word in his heart and on his lips; and he had no need to worship the devil if he knew who he was and whose he was: the Beloved Son of the living God.

Biblical scholar Audrey West reminds us that what is fascinating about this story is how it becomes a preview of Jesus' whole public life and ministry, as

God's beloved Son lived out in the flesh. What "happened in the wilderness didn't just stay in the wilderness", she said! Later in the gospel, when food ran short for those who gathered to hear him teach, Jesus fed thousands of hungry people in the wilderness with just a few *loaves and fishes*. He also taught his disciples to pray "give us Lord our daily bread". Jesus didn't ask God to save him from the consequences of his preaching and teaching which had angered his adversaries, but endured their taunts and gave up his life on a Roman cross, trusting to the end in God's ultimate power to give life. Jesus spurned the devil's offer of earthly power (or those who would make him king), and instead offered the kingdom of heaven to all who follow him. So "the wilderness tests of the Temptation account are not a one-time ordeal to get through, but they are tests of preparation for the choices Jesus made in his earthly ministry." (unquote)

Much like the tests of faith you and I face every day in our lives, and the choices we make. How do you and I respond when we are tempted? Not just when you and I are hungry, but when we face physical trials and intellectual or ethical temptations. They won't be to turn stones into bread ourselves, to leap off temple towers, or worship the devil – though for some, they are! We most often have very different trials and temptations. They include the temptation to say:

*I don't need God; I can get through this fine all by myself;

*I can hand over all responsibility to my elected leaders, because that's their job! It's not my fault if they abuse their power!

*I can trust my own prejudices about other people, and I have no obligation to care for or love my neighbor, because everyone is on their own!

As people of faith who follow Jesus, we know that none of the above is true. But even so, we hear every day from someone that "God won't care what you do – in fact there isn't any God, so what's the problem?" "I'm not my brother's keeper," or "those people don't have any rights, because they're here illegally, so it doesn't matter what we do to them". Too often we fail to live up to Jesus' command to love your neighbor by giving in to our temptation to look the other way, stay silent in the face of evil, let things slide, to not make an effort, to let somebody else care for our neighbors, or give up when things get too challenging.

But the good news is that there is no temptation, no trial that our Lord Jesus has not already faced, and overcome. This gives us an example to follow, a way to face our own challenges with the most effective response of all: with prayer and faith in God's power to heal and to save. When you and I know "who we are and whose we are" – beloved children of God, then we can learn how to be strong in our faithfulness to God, in our love, our words and our actions for our neighbor. And when we fail or fall, we know the promise of forgiveness, and so we can repent of our sins and rely on God's mercy. So in this world of trials and testing, we ask God to grant us grace, and make us strong in faith, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Bless the family of Nick Helgeson, nephew of Chris Sprung and DeAnne Hilgers, who died last Sunday. Comfort Bob Landt in the death of his beloved wife, Rhynda Landt, who died this past week. Grant them comfort as they grieve, and the peace of faith in the promise of the resurrection.

Merciful God,

Receive the sacrifice of our praise and thanksgiving and the offering of our lives, that following in the way of the cross, we may know the joy of the resurrection; through Christ our Lord.