

**San Lorenzo Community Church**

**United Church of Christ**

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, March 5, 2017

**Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Matthew 4:1-11.**

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup> "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

<sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup> "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

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I heard a bit of a story the other day about an acolyte who caught her hair on fire during communion. I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but I think it had to do with a relatively small chancel, lots of candles including torches in floor-stands, and long hair.

At some point she got too close to a candle and her hair caught on fire. At first people just smelled it, then she turned to one side and the choir saw it, then the assisting minister saw it and started beating it out with his hands while family members got up from their pews and headed for the front.

After it was all over, someone commented to her about how calm she had been and she drew herself up and said, "I AM an acolyte and acolytes DO NOT panic!"

Lent is a time for us to fast and pray and think about questions of identity and mission; of who we are and what it is we are to do. And like the acolyte with her hair on fire, we must not panic. We must firmly say "I am a beloved child of God, and children of God do not panic!"

Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's mercy. For forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for what comes next.

- Forty: the days and nights that Noah and his family endured the deluge on board the ark, after which God made a covenant never again to destroy the earth with a flood (Gen 7:4, 12; 8:6; 9:8-17);
- Forty: the days and nights Moses fasted on Mount Sinai as he inscribed the words of God's covenant for the Israelites (Exodus 24:18; 34:27-28; Deut 9:9);
- Forty: the days and nights Elijah fasted in the desert before receiving a new commission from God (1 Kgs 19:8);
- Forty: the years the Israelites wandered the wilderness in preparation for their arrival in the Promised Land (e.g., Exodus 16:35; Deut 2:7);
- Forty: the days of the season of Lent as Christians participate in Jesus' ministry and follow his way toward the cross. How might we make ourselves ready for the places we are called to be? To what mission is God calling the church? What is needed for us, this congregation, corporately and individually, to be prepared?

As long as don't panic in the face of disaster, injustice or misfortune, as long as you remember that you are a child of God and that the person in front of you is also a child of God, as long as you use this time to learn how to remain in the moment and open yourself, even to pour yourself out for others, then you will be ready, prepared for what comes next.

Because here's the thing – what happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness. How you prepare yourself is always demonstrated in how you live your life.

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That's the position Jesus was in when he began his journey in the wilderness. That's the situation Jesus was in when the Devil came up to him and asked him to turn the stone into bread. After all, in a world filled with unbelievable hunger and famine, why not? That's the situation when the Devil told Jesus to leap from the pinnacle of the temple. After all, in a world grown cynical and callous in the face of inspiration, why not do an outrageous act to make others believe? That's the situation when Jesus was told to go into politics. After all, in a world of slavery, war, oppression and disregard for human life, why not?

The temptation is not that food, power and leadership are inherently wrong; but rather that they can be used for the wrong ends or at the wrong time. It's what you do with them and how you use them that matters.

Sometimes we are in situations that call for a whole lot of courage, a whole lot of bravery, and a lot of resistance – there are difficult situations in life and God, in all of her wisdom, puts us in front of those difficult situations for a reason.

It is no mistake that you are who you are. It is no mistake that you are a Christian; it is no mistake that you are a Mom or a Grandma or maybe a Dad and a Grandpa, an Aunt or an Uncle. It is no mistake that you are a son or a daughter. It is no mistake. God has led you to this role, to this position, to these beliefs. And from your experience and knowledge of being a Christian or being a son or daughter, you know what it means to have integrity and courage, to be in relationship with people you love, to remain strong and awake.

I think it is ironic that these temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness would later become the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry. In a short time, Jesus would preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, cleanse the lepers, and heal the blind and crippled. In a short time, Jesus would feed the crowd with only a few loaves and fish. In a short time, Jesus would turn doubting into believing.

And with each of these acts of ministry, Jesus was immediately opposed by the powers of the time. Even now, as it was then, those who reap huge profits from the poverty of others, those who have enormous power from the oppression of others, those who use others for their own means will do almost anything to shut down such ministry.

It was no mistake that Jesus went up into the wilderness. He was not lost. He was not be punished for something he had done wrong. He was led by the Holy Spirit for a purpose: to fast and to pray; to be tempted and tested; to have the opportunity to demonstrate courage; to remember his own identity and not strive to be someone he is not.

Each day we are bombarded by countless advertisements that seem to tell us we are missing something important – ads that play on our insecurity and sense of inadequacy, and undermine our God-given gift of identity with the promise that if we buy this car or use that deodorant or make our teeth brighter we will be acceptable.

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The message of the consumer culture is simple: *you are not enough*. Not skinny enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love, and acceptance. And here's the thing: it's a lie, it's a damned lie. You are everything and always enough. You are lovable and worthy. You already have integrity and compassion. You have the courage and strength to face the difficult situations in life.

There will be times in your future when you face injustices, when you see the oppression of others, when you are confronted with a bully on the playground or someone who is taking advantage of someone else. In that moment, you will be tempted to not get involved; you will be tempted to walk away and turn a blind eye.

But I tell you here and now that you have a calling; because you are enough to resist the temptation. You are enough to stop the war and establish peace. You are enough to protect the poor and vulnerable and to reach out in friendship. You are enough for what happens next.

Lent is our time to think and pray, to slow things down so we can listen more closely to what God is saying, and to learn more deeply who we are and what we are called to do. Use this time for renewal. Use this time to go deep in your soul and find your inner spirit. Use this time to remember you are a beloved child of God and, with that, you are enough. Do not panic for you are sufficient to do good in the world. Amen.