

“40 Days of Service”

Meditation on Matthew 4:1-11

March 5, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ 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.’” ⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

We had such a great turnout for our Church Work Day yesterday! With at least 30 volunteers, Herb said it was the largest number of participants for a Church Work Day that he can remember. He was wearing a cap with a C on it for Chicago Cubs, but Debra, who must have put in at least 30 hours of calling and organizing teams of volunteers before yesterday’s event, says the “C” stands for “CHEERLEADER.” His job was to walk around and lift everyone up with his kind remarks and gentle sense of humor.

On Saturday, beginning at 8 a.m., workers painted walls and fences, power-washed walls and walks, dug up plants and planted new ones, and weeded and pruned back what was overgrown. When I arrived around 9:30, folks were climbing ladders to hop on the roof to make repairs and to cut down large tree limbs, hanging over parking areas.

One guy, perched confidently on a tree limb overhead invited me to “come on up!” He seemed quite at home on his tree limb, as did the others working with him, filling up the back of a red pick up truck.

What a great time of fellowship it was! It was the perfect way to start off the first weekend in Lent.

People walking or driving by took notice of the commotion outside the church--cars and trucks parked all over the grass, the noise and smoke of power tools mingled with talking and laughter. They must have wondered, “What’s going on with the Presbyterians today?”

We look inward and reach outward in the season of Lent that has just begun. We examine our hearts and lives to see how we might be more faithful to God’s call. We are also reminded of how much we need God’s grace and unconditional love! The word *Lent* comes from the Middle English word “lente” meaning *springtime* and from the Old English word meaning “to lengthen” as in the lengthening of daylight hours in spring. In the early church, Lent became the name for the 40 weekdays before Easter, beginning with Ash Wednesday. This was a time when new converts would study the faith in preparation for baptism the night before Easter. It was a time of penitence for those already baptized and

to make a sacrifice, such as giving up meat, in honor of the Lord's 40-day fast, when the Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be with God--and be tempted by the devil. Some traditional folks still observe Lent by giving up something pleasurable to eat.

In the past few years, Presbyterians have been challenged to observe the holy season differently than just giving up a food that we enjoy. Donald McKim writes in a 2015 article in *Call to Worship* of other possibilities for Lenten spiritual practices. We could, instead, give up something that is more harmful to us and the Church, such as negative attitudes and bad habits. Then, add on something new that IS good--new attitudes and practices, new friendships, and new ways of serving in our churches and communities. "We never know," McKim says, "what the insights and prompting of the Holy Spirit will provide!"

The important thing is that the spiritual practices of giving up and adding on-- whatever they might be, should bring us nearer to the Lord, and build on our relationships with others. Others should see God's grace in us. Others should experience God's love.

The "40 days and nights" in our gospel reading today connects our Savior's story--and the New Covenant God offers to all in Jesus Christ--to the Hebrew Bible. While the rain coming down for "40 Days and 40 nights" in the Noah's Ark account is the first incidence of that phrase (Gen. 7:4, 12:16; 9:8-16), the "40 days and 40 nights" in Matthew 4 is probably meant to connect Jesus' wilderness experience with Moses and Elijah. In Exodus 34:27-28, Moses fasts alone in God's presence on Mount Sinai as he receives the Ten Commandments. in 1 Kings 19:17-12, Elijah fasts for 40 days and nights as he flees to Mount Horeb (also

known as Sinai), where he encounters God. Matthew will connect the three again--Jesus, Moses and Elijah-- in Matthew 17 with Jesus' transfiguration.

Three gospels share Jesus' fasting/temptation/wilderness experience. While Luke's account is similar to Matthew's, Mark's gospel, the briefest and probably the oldest, tells the story in 2 verses! Mark 1:12-13 says, "The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him."

The 40 days in the wilderness immediately follows Jesus' baptism. The Spirit that comes upon Jesus in his baptism is already guiding him to do God's will. Chapter 4 begins, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Another connection with the baptism passage is when the devil begins each of his questions to Jesus by addressing him, "*If you are the Son of God...*" At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven declares Jesus' identity as the Son of God. This "if" is more like "since." The tempter isn't questioning his identity. He questions Jesus' allegiance. Jesus models for us that when we are tempted, God's Word and Spirit will strengthen us to do God's will.

All of Jesus' responses come from Deuteronomy, the most quoted book of the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) in the NT. This first temptation is for Jesus to put his own physical needs and desires ahead of God's Will for Him. Jesus answers, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." He is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3--a reminder of Israel's complete reliance on God in the wilderness for 40 years. "Yes, he humbled you by letting you go

hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

The “devil” then transports him to the holy city to the pinnacle of the temple, probably in a vision, saying, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” A fall from the pinnacle of the temple surely would be fatal. This is the temptation for Jesus to assert his power and will, again, over God, challenging God to save His life when he attempts to end it. The devil quotes from Psalm 91:11-12, taking it out of context when he says, “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.” The passage is a promise of protection for all who have “chosen to live in the shelter of the Most High,” but not an assurance of safety for Jesus if he tries to force God’s hand. Later, in Matthew 27:40, when Jesus suffers on the cross, he will be tempted by a similar way of thinking. “Those who passed by him hurled insults at him, shaking their heads. ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’”

The devil’s third temptation is the human desire for earthly power and prestige. He offers to “give” Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” if Jesus will fall down and worship him.

Jesus quotes Deut. 6:13, changing the word from “fear” to “worship,” saying, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Thinking about how successful and joyful our Church Work Day was yesterday on the first Saturday in Lent, here's my challenge to you. What other creative ways can we worship and serve the Lord throughout these 40 days? What do we need to give up? What habit or attitude is getting in the way of our wholehearted worship and service? What does the Lord want us to add on? What ministry, spiritual practice or acts of kindness are the Lord leading us to do? May others see God's grace in us. May others experience God's unconditional love.

Let us pray.

Holy One, thank you for your Word and Spirit that strengthened and guided your Son when he was in the wilderness 40 days. Thank you that he modeled for us that when we are tempted by the devil, we, too, should cling to your Word and Spirit, for you will guide us on our way. Lord, thank you for your grace that covers all our sins and for our faith in Your Son's suffering work on the cross that has brought us into right relationship with you. Show us throughout these 40 days, Lord, what attitudes or practices we need to give up--and what new, creative ministry activities and spiritual disciplines you might want us to add on. Lead us to be more like your Son. In His name we pray. Amen.