

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 5, 2017

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Tempted!

The way we read the Bible in church was never the way it was intended to be read - either by the ancient Israelites or Jesus' followers or the early Christians.

They never would have pulled out a little snippet, or told just a small part of a story like we do and did this morning. Especially the two passages that we have just heard. They become meaningful because of what came before them. It's like you telling a story about what happened on your vacation, but not telling the part of being on vacation, or who you were with, or where the funny thing took place right before...

So it is with both the story of Eve (and Adam) being tempted by the serpent, and with Jesus in the desert being tempted by the Devil.

What came before Adam, Eve, and the serpent is God lovingly creating the earth, all that is in it and on it, and the culmination - human beings. God blessed humanity by giving us a beautiful earth and all that we need to sustain ourselves, and the mandate to care for it all.

And what came before Jesus' temptations in the desert was his BAPTISM:

In which God declares Jesus as beloved and belonging to Him - and the exclamation point to that, was the dove-like Holy Spirit, so that there would be no question that this was God's doing, and not the same as all the other baptisms John was doing.

In both these stories, we learn that God provides all we need, and claims us as His own. Let that sink in....

You see what we need and who we are cannot be generated or created by us. Our identity is given to us, not created by us.

For example. No one wakes up one day and says: "You know who I'm going to be? I'm going to be one of those crazy people who paints my face, wears a costume, and goes wild at football games rooting for my team."

Instead, you hang out with friends, watch lots of football, decide to go to a game, discover someone has brought body paint, and then all of a sudden realize you are one of those persons! And you could say the same about the women in purple and red hats at restaurants, or bikers, or Trekkies, or just about any of the other groups we associate with and from which we derive a lot of our identity.

And that's what makes Baptism so powerful. We are adopted into a family of faith and, even more, told that we are God's beloved child and therefore have infinite worth. Yes, I know, you've heard that before. But can we really hear it too often? Because given what life throws at us, we may need a refresher as soon as lunch on Monday some weeks!

And it's when we forget that, that we begin to live from a place of insecurity and the temptations become dangerous to us. They're always there - these things that entice us to abuse power, satisfy our desires in destructive ways (to us and to others), feed our egos so that we diminish others....

They start small these temptations...

Stealing money lying around the house, or candy from the corner store
Cheating on the test, or exaggerating the results in that report
Tweaking the story to shift the blame off of you to someone else

These are the low hanging fruit dangling right before our eyes. All born of an insecurity of some sort when we forget that the Lord provides, and that we belong to Him!

And then our insecurity is fueled by subtle messages that seek to undermine our identity and invite us to forget whose we are. So many commercials and ads suggest we are inadequate. So many headlines suggest that there is not enough to go around. And so many politicians – of all parties – contend that we have a great deal to fear.

In the face of these identity-obscuring messages, we need to remember the baptismal promise that safeguarded and empowered Jesus. Which is the baptismal promise that reminds us that God says we are so totally enough, that there is plenty to go around, and that we need not live in fear.

You know the hymn I wish we were singing today? ***A Mighty Fortress is Our God!*** Written by Martin Luther, and typically sung on Reformation Sunday when we focus on our history as Protestants. But hear these words in the context of Jesus (and us!) being tempted.

*A mighty Fortress is our God, A Bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth His Name, From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.
And though this world, with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers, No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours Through Him who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His Kingdom is forever.*

On our own we CANNOT withstand nor survive all that is thrown at us, and is swirling around us. But Jesus can - which is why we need to stick close to him!

Remember, our identity comes from the people with whom we hang out; and is always received, rather than created. It comes as a gift and a promise.

And so I invite you to find more ways to hang out at church and be surrounded by the family of faith that will keep telling you that you – and indeed all of us – have value, worth, and purpose. Because, we need sustenance and strength for the journey. And here it is....on this table.

Just like my mom used to tell me I needed to eat a good breakfast on days when I had a test...we need to eat the only food that can ward off temptations both great and small. So today receive the gift of Jesus as well as the Good News that you, like he, are beloved.

Amen.