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Lent 1

Last Monday afternoon, we were driving over to the church with a friend to decorate the cupcakes for the Mardi Gras fundraiser. While we were in the van, Sarah said to her friend, do you know what Mardi Gras is? And her friend answered, “No, not really.” So Sarah launches into this story about how Mardi Gras is the last celebration before Lent. And that Lent is the season when we hear the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness for forty days and we think about our own temptations and sometimes give up things for Lent and then eventually the season ends with Jesus dying on a cross. After barely a split-second pause, I heard Sarah’s friend respond with a wide-eyed tone, “Well that took a dark turn.”

I laughed at her response that afternoon in the car, but the truth of the matter is, the story of Jesus is indeed a dark story. Of course, it’s not all dark. The story of Jesus begins with rejoicing angels and adoring shepherds. And in his story, we hear the voice of God calling out his belovedness. During the ministry of Jesus, there are healings and reunions and joyful gatherings around the table. Then, of course, there’s Easter and resurrection.

But Jesus’ story takes place in the context of a dark world where those with power hold most of the cards. The powerful determine the fate of the other 99%, and they usually don’t act in generous and peaceful ways. Jesus and the people of Palestine lived under the, often, brutal authority of the Roman Emperor and those who gained and kept power by doing his will. Much of the history of Israel was one of subjugation—under Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Macedonia, and then Rome—whichever was the strongest imperial power in their region at the time and whomever had the biggest army to threaten the people. Jesus and all of Israel understood what it meant to live in fear of those with authority.

This corrupting sort of power that we see reflected in the Old and New Testaments of our Bible is still very much alive in our world today, despite the birth and growth of democracies across the world. We only have to look at Vladimir Putin launching a military attack on Ukraine, a sovereign and democratically led nation. Who knows how many lives will be lost and what will be destroyed in that war? When one has great power and an enormous army as Putin does, the damage they can inflict is massive. In that respect, that reality has not changed much since the time of Jesus and the Roman Empire. And when people of the world turn a blind eye to a tyrant’s abuse of power, the capacity for evil and suffering is limitless.

But let’s turn for a moment to our Gospel story this morning which is always the first of the Lenten season. This year we get Luke’s version which begins... “Jesus, full of the

Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” (Luke 4:1)

What exactly did Satan use to tempt Jesus? In short, he tempted him to take advantage of his power. The underlying argument that Satan makes in each of these three temptations is that if Jesus is indeed the Son of God...if as we believe that Jesus was God come to us in bodily flesh...then all the power in the world was his. Therefore, there was no reason for him to be famished—all he needed to do was to make bread out of the rocks before him. Furthermore, Satan promised to give Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world, if he would only worship him. And last, Satan tempted Jesus to prove God’s favoritism by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem so that the angels would have to save him and everyone would see his power.

By saying “no” to each of these tests, Jesus is making a statement about who he is and what he thinks about the kind of power Satan understands. He is giving us a foretaste of how he will achieve the salvation of the world: not with a violent, powerful response, but with self-emptying love.

I can’t help but wonder how the disciples felt when they first heard this story. I can imagine all of them gathered around a fire after dinner and Jesus sharing this wilderness experience with them. I wonder if they were amazed and maybe even a little upset that Jesus turned down these opportunities for power. They, like their fellow Jews, suffered under the oppression of Rome. If Jesus had access to such power, why not save them from that oppression? They may have wondered what good is self-emptying love when there is so much suffering in the world, including our human vulnerabilities like hunger, isolation, sickness, and mortality. The disciples may have been bewildered that Jesus, their teacher and hoped-for messiah, wouldn’t save them from all of that suffering by saying “yes” to the tempter. Yes, to the promise of that power.

But what they discover in this story and what they will continue to learn about Jesus as they accompany him to the cross...well, almost to the cross...is that Jesus never believed that worldly power could be wielded and controlled. It would always corrupt and would never be the path toward salvation.

We see this in world leaders of today and yesterday. When they have great power, it corrupts them. It makes them do terrible things to preserve their power and to get more of it. Jesus, on the other hand, by rejecting that power, will save by walking alongside us and experiencing everything we do, including sorrow, suffering, and death. Satan wanted Jesus to be a God of power, but Jesus insisted on being a God of love.

So what if we view Jesus’s time in the wilderness as a time when he was tempted to stray from his identity as the Beloved Son of God—tempted to choose power over love and relationship? Where’s the Good News in his rejection of the tempter and what does that mean for us, his followers.

Being a Christian means making claims to a particular identity—and identity of trying to act like Jesus, even though we often fail. It is during this season of Lent that we work to remove those distractions that pull us away from that identity as we strive to grow in our faith and the imitation of Christ.

We began this season with a very visible sign—ashes on our forehead. Ashes that remind us of our mortality. But there's more to it than that. Some of you may notice each year that the ashes are sticky and have the smell of anointing oil. Many priests mix those ashes with chrism oil, the oil of baptism, before we put them on your forehead. By adding that chrism oil, we are reminding you of the cross made on your forehead at baptism and of the words spoken in that moment, "You are a beloved child of God and marked as God's own forever.

The combination of the ashes and oil remind us, not only of our mortality then, but also of our responsibility to our baptismal covenant...to following in the way of Jesus who chose love over power again and again.

In that covenant, we like Jesus, promise to turn away from Satan and to persist in resisting evil. Nowhere in our baptismal covenant are we commissioned with gaining power over others. Instead we are called to serve others, to love our neighbors, to strive for justice and peace, to respect the dignity of every person and to protect our fragile earth.

During this Lenten season, I hope that you will remember your belovedness, that you have been marked as God's own forever. Remember that we follow Jesus by turning away from the temptations of power, and instead, insisting on the power of love. Amen.