

TEMPTED TO GO IT ALONE

Matthew 4.1-11

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Have mercy on *us*.

Grant *us* peace.

And so, as some traditions would say: “May the peace of Christ be with you.” And you would say: “And also with you.”

You have probably noticed that there is a collectivist sensibility in much of the world’s spirituality and in our own.

“Give *us* this day *our* daily bread.”

“Forgive *us our* debts as *we* forgive *our* debtors.”

“Have mercy on *us*; grant *us* peace.”

That’s an important thing to recognize when we come together on a Sunday morning because we are being invited here to look at the world and our lives differently – different from the highly-individualized culture in which we live where we are chronically tempted to see ourselves as “lone rangers” for the good or lonely victims of all that is bad.

Of course, the other temptation of this individualism is to look around at the world and assume that everyone – collectively - is just like me. My individual reality becomes the standard for defining everyone else’s.

One of the practical ways I experience the temptation of a collectivist understanding of my life, is when I say: “You know, *we* need to do something about those dirty dishes or *we* need to deal with that difficult relationship or *we* need to make a plan for doing something.”

And be *we*, I mean *you*.

In this work we are doing on racism, I think that sometimes white liberals like to say: “*Our culture* is so racist,” by which we mean, *other people* are so racist.

What this training has taught me is that when we say, “*our culture* is so racist,” we mean *I am*. I don’t want to be. I may feel guilty about it. I may try to rationalize it. But I have to own that the collective sensibility of “*our culture*” is not a pass for *me*.

There is something very wise in saying, “The peace of Christ be with you” and you responding, “And also with you.” It recognizes that the peace we share is not just for a collective “us,” it is a connection – an interconnection really – between you and me; between every you and every me.

As you may have read in the *Spire* or heard on Wednesday, we are re-imagining Lent this year by suggesting a new take on that famous old verse: “God so loved the world ... that God gave us *each other*.” We want to encourage you to think about this sacred journey we are on as an opportunity to pay attention to our interconnections.

Now the story for today actually begins before the temptation text we always hear on the first Sunday of Lent.

In Matthew’s story, at the end of chapter 3, Jesus comes to John to be baptized. And John doesn’t want to do it. In fact, the text says that John tries to *prevent* Jesus from doing it and he says: “Why are you coming to me to be baptized, I need to be baptized by you?”

And then Jesus says something very interesting. He says: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for *us* to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, Jesus is saying to John, “this isn’t just about me; it’s about how we are interconnected with each other and with all those who are coming to re-commit themselves to renew the promise of the Promised Land.”

This is important for *us*, Jesus says, by which he means *him*; by which he means the connection he has and they all have with each other.

And so Jesus is baptized and the heavens open and a voice says: “This is my Beloved One with whom I am well pleased.”

Then, the very next thing is the text for today:

Matthew 4:1-11

⁴Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ ⁴But 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, ⁶saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“God will command the angels concerning you”,
and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

⁷Jesus said to the tempter, ‘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; ⁹and the tempter said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰Jesus said, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only God.” ’

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

You know, I’ve never thought of this before but I wonder if part of the temptation here was for Jesus to go it alone –

to do his work in grand dramatic displays that would convince everyone that he *alone* could save the world.

Jesus hears that voice from heaven that says, “You are my beloved one in whom I am well pleased,” and immediately the Spirit leads him – alone - into the wilderness where he fasts for forty days and forty nights.

And when he is starving, there is another voice he hears. That voice says, “*If* you are God’s beloved one, why mess around with grain and farmers and bakers, do it yourself; turn these stones magically into bread.”

And Jesus says, “One does not live by bread *alone* but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The next time Jesus is out in the wilderness and a whole crowd of people is hungry, it takes a little boy’s lunch of loaves and fishes to feed everybody. Jesus doesn’t go it alone. He doesn’t dramatically turn all the stones into bread. He demonstrates the power of that interconnection between that little boy and Jesus and the disciples and the crowd so that something happens for all them.

Jesus resists the temptation to go it alone.

Out there, alone in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted by a voice that says: “Look, if you are really God’s beloved one, prove it; go to the holy city and throw yourself from a pinnacle of the temple so that angels can demonstrate that there is nothing anyone can do to you.” Be that invincible super-hero the people will want you to be; the one who – alone – can take on the Romans and save the people.

But Jesus resists the temptation to go it alone.

Alone in the wilderness, there is that tempting voice of political power: “*If* you fall down and worship me, your work is done; all the world’s

political power will belong to you. It is finished. You won't need anybody else."

But Jesus resists the temptation to go it alone.

And the very next story is Jesus inviting Peter and Andrew, James and John, to join him. Jesus is not going to give in to the temptation to do the journey of his life alone because he knows the real power is in the interconnections between every you and every me.

Are you ever tempted to go it alone? Maybe it's your ego or the failures of your friends or just that it's easier to be a lone ranger who doesn't have to deal with other people's stuff.

But are we ever really alone?

We may feel lonely. Bill Malcomson was writing in his blog recently about the reasons people feel lonely. People are made to feel different and isolated. A beloved one is sick or away or has died. A relationship is broken or someone feels rejected or misunderstood.

We may often feel lonely. But are we ever really alone?

Pastor Harriet sent me an article about this passage by an author who says that this temptation takes place in the wilderness which is "just a place where people are not." Jesus wasn't alone in the wilderness. There just weren't other people there.

Perhaps it is the ego of our humanity that assumes, if no people are there, we are alone. But, if you have been in the wilderness by yourself, you quickly discover that you are not alone. You are surrounded by those unmistakable interconnections with nature that "civilization" has helped us otherwise ignore or avoid. You are aware of those other voices that are inside of you. You feel that presence greater than your own.

When Mark writes his version of the story he says simply: “Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.”

Jesus was not alone in the wilderness. It’s just that other people weren’t there.

And that wilderness gave Jesus the opportunity to experience his interconnection with the earth, with wild things, with his own body, with the voices that both affirm his identity and that tempt him to twist it.

In the end, he is not alone because those angels the tempter promises to rescue him if he decides to go it alone and jump off a pinnacle of the temple, do show up. They show up to minister to him; to be present with him; to commune with him.

I was reminded a couple weeks ago of that Psalm:

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Hell, you are there.

The truth is, we may often feel lonely but we are never really alone.

Loneliness may distract us from the truth.

Ego may tempt us from the reality.

Suffering and disappointment may numb us to the experience.

But the truth is, we are not alone. And we don’t need to try to go it alone. We are always and everywhere interconnected.

That is the collective witness of our spiritual traditions and it is more than that.

Because, when I say, “we are not alone,” I mean *you* and I mean *me*.

That's why this Table is so important. That's why, like those angels in the story, we serve one another. That's why we tell again a story of blessing and brokenness and new beginnings.

Because wherever you are in that story, you are not alone.

And so, that same voice that opened heaven to say, "You are my beloved one," invites you to this table today.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Sign up to receive "Bill's Blogs" by contacting him at wjmalcomson18@gmail.com. The article about temptation and wilderness can be found online at "Wild Lectionary" at www.radicaldiscipleship.net.