

Taking Shortcuts

Lent 1a - Genesis 2:15-3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

Slide: Backpacking

One of the greatest lessons that both my parents taught me and all of us girls (I have three sisters), was related to one of the greatest pastimes there was, which is camping. Of course, there were many things my parents taught me and my sisters along the way, but when camping, backpacking, and hiking, there were very specific rules in our family. Along the way, I began to become aware that what we were being taught to follow was the golden rule: love your neighbor as yourself. For instance, these are some of the things that I learned along the way:

- Never leave food or any smelly perfumy thing in your backpack where a bear can get it. Always hang everything up out of their grasp. Why would you want to put yourself and others in danger by bringing bears to your campground?
- Always pick up after yourself and pack it out. Leave everything how you found it.
- Only light a fire if it is appropriate to do so and there is no high fire danger.
- And last, but not least, never, ever take shortcuts across switchbacks. It looks terrible, it's the easy way up, and it's bad for nature to do that. Do the hard work, don't take the easy way out and enjoy the journey along the way. To this very day, it is a huge pet peeve of mine when I see switchback cutting on a trail.

Slide: Switchbacks

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." but he answered, "it is written, 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

In pondering the temptation story of Jesus this week, I was drawn to just this first temptation about bread and hunger for my contemplation. Of course, Jesus is hungry after giving up sustenance for 40 days walking in a wilderness way. And the tempter has got an opening. Essentially, he says, I know you can work miracles. Just change the stones to bread, easy peasy for you, Jesus. Now, the tempter must know something that we don't. Sure, we know that Jesus can miraculously heal people, that he can feed a multitude bread, and we know that God has proclaimed him as the beloved Son because a week ago we encountered his transfiguration on a mountain top. We know this, because we have heard the entire story.

And our lectionary skips around all over the place during the church year; so we are not encountering the gospel story from start to finish. But if you are reading along in this gospel by Matthew, we have yet to see Jesus do anything miraculous. This is only chapter 4. Up to now, from chapter one to chapter 4, we have seen the glory of God in the birth of Jesus; we've seen the escape to Egypt to run from King Herod; and we've seen the proclamation of John the Baptist as Jesus is baptized. But then from there Jesus is driven directly into the desert to fast and to be tempted for 40 days. Only John the Baptist, Jesus, and the tempter know at this point that Jesus is who God claims him to be and that he is capable of miraculous things. It is a story of suspense for those first encountering Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Will Jesus take the shortcut, or will he value the experience he just had for 40 days and 40 nights wondering? Think on this, if the first miracle that Jesus had done was to make bread from a stone, would he truly be the Christ that the world would need?

Slide: Trail

A lot of people look at the story of the temptation of Jesus as proof that Jesus could withstand the worst of temptations and that shows that he was able to withstand the sin that Adam and Eve could not. And sure, I'm pretty sure that I have preached that before. There's real value to looking at this story as "look at what our Lord did so that he could continue his journey as the human one and the divine one for our sakes". This temptation story alone shows us that Jesus is powerful enough to destroy evil, the evil that is directly opposed to him. And that's a great message! Suffice to say however that's also a very Protestant hard working attitude message when looking at this gospel story for today. Look at the hard and difficult thing that Jesus endured. It can be easy then to apply that to ourselves, that somehow, we should also have that same work hard attitude so that we can conquer temptation ourselves. That's a hard act to follow. And, it is impossible for us to follow it completely.

Jesus faces several temptations after his formative time in the wilderness. He's learned so much about his own calling, which is the purpose of why the Holy Spirit sends him out there. This temptation to turn stones into bread is about meeting real needs, human ones, something that God is finally chosen to endure and understand. But this first temptation is not about ultimate power like the other temptations are about. So, why not take a shortcut if you can and get some fast food? I mean who's really going to know? Why not indeed?

Because it turns out that God never takes shortcuts. We have the biblical narrative to help us with that. In the little conversation with the tempter, Jesus quotes directly from the book of Deuteronomy chapter 5 where Moses explains that the divine law is far from a list of dos and don'ts, and is a gift meant to help order and sustain human life. Notice this when Jesus says, "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." What's more, Moses continues, the Israelites 40 years of manna - that is bread in the wilderness, was meant to

prepare them to receive the law, and to humble them so that they would learn that God is the one sustaining them in their lives. In other words, living on manna was a course of preparation for later living in the Promised Land.

According to Moses, if the Israelites had immediately entered that land of milk and honey they likely would have misinterpreted the abundance as a result of their own efforts rather than as a graceful gift of God. They would have said to themselves, “my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this”. That's from Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 17. The truth then, as Moses insists, is that God is the true source of every good gift from the luxury of milk and honey to a simple loaf of bread. It's because of God's loving, covenantal promises that these good things come. Trusting in God for that bread each day for 40 years was essentially the classroom for learning not to rely only on oneself. Now 40 years is no shortcut!

Furthermore, after 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus knows just how much a gift bread is, not only from the story of Moses, but because the work that goes into making bread begins at the very start of the seed. It's an entire process that begins with the gift of creation. Bread takes time: put the seed in the ground, wait for rain and sun, care for the soil, harvest and preserve it. Then, add the ingredients needed, bake, serve and enjoy. Repeat by putting more seed in the ground. Short cutting the process of the gift of bread in order to satisfy quickly, means that the outcome can't be as effective. And, Jesus of course extends the metaphor by saying as Moses did we don't just live from bread but from the word of God. That bread creates community around the table, feeds the hungry, and sends us out to reach out to others. Here Jesus is taking seriously the gifts of creation and the creator.

As followers of Jesus, we take Jesus' respect of the gift that is given and do not take the easy way out when looking for solutions to real problems. Instead, we search for ways to create community and to reach

out to those who are excluded. We look to Jesus as the example of one who did not rush to the cross, but took the time to live with us, to instruct us, heal us and be present with us. In the gift that is bread given to us every time we share the meal of communion, we know that Jesus did not take the easy way out. That gift, that bread, took the whole journey from stable to tomb.

Slide: UNFINISHED

Our theme for this Lent is “Unfinished: Hearing God's call in the ‘not yet.’” While in the wilderness, Jesus was pressed to the human limit. His 40 days were a time of discernment, a time of listening and then finally going forward with the calling and identity that he had come to accept. His example of refraining from the easy fix and taking shortcuts helps us in our lives of faith as we seek to understand God's call for us, both as individuals and as a faith community. As human beings, we often desire for our faith to be simple and easy, sometimes leading us to take shortcuts as Jesus was enticed to do by the tempter. Instead, let us take the whole path, where at journey's end is the true bread from heaven.

Amen.