

Sermon 2-26-23
Paul Purdue preaching

As we processed into the ordination service, I learned my name was not printed in the bulletin, and someone pointed out that the new robe my church purchased for me was gray which is not an approved liturgical color. It all felt pretty ordinary until 90 minutes into the service when I knelt at the altar; Bishop Kenneth Carder laid hands on my head and prayed, "Paul Purdue, take thou authority", I think I began to cry. Memories and the moment merged together, and it seemed like beloved childhood Sunday school teachers and my long passed grandparents stood around me- it felt like a circle of love. The reality that I can psychologically deconstruct this holy moment does not tarnish what a holy, hopeful, and affirming gift it is even to this day.

Have you ever had a moment when it felt like the sky cracked open a smidge and heaven broke into the world? Have you ever felt a deep and delightful connectedness to God, yourself, and the universe? Sometimes if we slow down enough to break up our daily patterns and truly give ourselves to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, being present, giving generously, serving freely, and looking for God often the Holy cracks into our ordinary. Maybe you caught glimpses of heaven, watching the sunrise, counting the cardinals at your bird feeder, smelling the spring flowers, hiking a trail, singing a hymn, passing the peace, taking Communion, hugging a friend, welcoming a child, sharing coffee, forgiving from your heart, marching for justice, welcoming someone at our Pride booth, or serving a meal at Room in the Inn. Do you make time to enter everyday wilderness apart from media, notifications, scrambling, and all the distractions that keep us from being present in life? Take time to be holy.

Our passage comes right after "the Heaven opened" and "the Spirit of God descended down like a dove and rested on Jesus" as he was being baptized. Jesus heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my child whom I dearly love; I delight in you." What comes next after our holy moments, after the Spirit rests on us and realize that we are beloved? Where does God's love lead us?

Mark says 'immediately' while Matthew simply makes clear that on the heels of Jesus hearing God's voice and peeking into heaven that "then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him." Where does love lead us? Could it be that knowing God's deep love always calls us back into the world? But why temptation, why the devil, why fasting for 40 days? Could it be that love compels us to become intentional about facing down the things that pull us away from loving God and neighbors? I wonder if intentional devotional time allows the soul to declutter enough that we can understand love as more than a happy commandment but as God's life-giving lifestyle for each of us. Don't we need daily and weekly intentional step-aways to stay rooted and grounded in love?

I recounted in yesterday's Lenten guide to reading through Matthew that I grew up terrified of the devil, demons, witches, and hell. I did not fear Frankenstein or Dracula because I knew they were imaginary. But I was afraid of the devil and preoccupied with the thought of hell. My fear came more from movies and a few scary summer camp

sermons than any scholarly breakdown of the Greek words for devil, demons, or hell. Matthew offers no descriptions of the tempter/accuser/devil. Without some extra-Biblical baggage, you might conceive of the tempter many different ways.

If I was going to cast the devil, I might pick a handsome but slightly seasoned Hollywood heartthrob like Brad Pitt or Viola Davis. A gorgeous tempter would ride past the palm trees like a Romanesque cowboy with a Gucci saddlebag filled with wine, fresh fruit, and foil wrapped Italian confections. The devil would smell like wildflowers and their eyes dance with the mischief of a gentle smile. Chomping on glistening grapes, the devil would always kindly offer Jesus a bite before apologizing for forgetting about Jesus' 40 day fast.

Matthew tells us that 40 days into the fast, Jesus was starving and the tempter digs at Jesus' identity, "Since you are God's son, command these stones to become bread." The devil probes what it means to be beloved by God! Why go hungry? Why touch lepers? Why welcome outcasts? Is it not better to feed yourself, I mean, you are God's child? John tells us that after Jesus fed 5000, the crowd wanted to coopt Jesus' ministry by seeking to make him a King by force. (John 6) What do we do with the knowledge that we are deeply loved by God? Where does love lead us, do we feed ourselves to feed the hungry?

How does Jesus answer the temptation to feed his ego and his body? Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8, "It's written, people won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God." How well do we know the scripture? Can we parse the parables from commands, the inconsequential rules about sideburns or kissing from questions of moral law like upholding fidelity, peace and justice? (Matthew 23:23) In those moments when we are tempted to sell out or sell ourselves short, are we grounded in enough scripture to be able to spot the allure of temptation with, "It's written, people won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God." Do we reflexively know that there is more to life than money, power, and pleasure? Where does love lead us?

How did Jesus and the devil get to the holy city? Did the devil bring an extra horse or offer Jesus a ride in some hellacious stretch limo? Matthew only tells us, "(that rebuffed) the devil brought Jesus into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. Standing some 207 feet off the ground, the tempter again tries to chip at Jesus's identity, "Since you are God's son, throw yourself down...(Did God really say, "You are my child whom I dearly love; I delight in you"? Prove it. Prove God for me.) ... throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone." Please notice that the devil is literally quoting Psalm 91:11-12.

The devil's suggestion would've been one way to bring the crowd around to Jesus' message, wouldn't it? There with about a half a million Passover pilgrims, Jesus leaps and slowly glides down like an untethered Rihanna at the Super Bowl and begins teaching "blessed are the poor in spirit, the humble, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers they shall be called the children of God." Comical right, but is the devil not only demanding proof that Jesus is who he thinks he is, but perhaps also pulling

Jesus into a show-front faith? Where will Love lead us, will we trust that the Spirit can whisper in the wilderness or do we need big shows to keep us faithful?

Jesus replied, "Again it's written, don't test the Lord your God." (Duet 6:16)

Did you notice that the devil is pretty good at quoting scripture? Some folks leaving the United Methodist Church say that churches like Belmont do not care about the Bible. They are just wrong. What they mean is that they interrupt the Bible in a different way than we do, but that soundbite lacks the bite of accusing us of losing touch with the Bible. Adam Hamilton likes to say that if you have money invested in the UMC pension fund, then you interpret scripture because Jesus tells us "do not store up treasures on earth". If anyone says, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it," just remember the devil quotes scripture too. Faith requires wrestling with interpretation, it is more than not blind acceptance.

Then the devil brought Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The tempter said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

I picture Jesus and the devil sitting on the edge of a desert cliff top as the sun set, maybe overlooking the dead sea and King Herod's winter palace. The devil, eating a slice of chilled cantaloupe, makes the pitch: "Jesus, just tone it down a little bit, don't flip over tables, why comment on King Herod's politics or mess with the high priests. Think about King David, a hymn writer but what a palace! Solomon built the temple but had 1,000 wives, good guy really. Caesar has a hot tub filled with water kept at a perfect 101 degrees, deli trays (kosher for you, Jesus, of course), fresh fruit smoothies, writers, editors, and social media handlers to help spread your words. Just lay off that cross stuff; sit on a throne. Don't flip over the moneychangers' table; isn't that illegal? Don't identify with the poor; sit on the throne, be a king. Just little changes really... have some fun... you deserve it, you are beloved, and personally, I think you can serve God and money. God delight in you- you deserve thrones" Where will love lead us, to sit on thrones or humbly wash one another's feet?

Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, 'You will worship the Lord your God and serve God alone.'" (Duet 6:13) The devil gave up and left, and then angels came and took care of Jesus.

Love leads us to make time to be holy, to drink in the holy moments to remember that we are beloved. During Lent, let us make time for intentional daily devotion and weekly worship. And secondly, Love sends us to face our temptations that pull us away from lives of less than love. We need both practices to live lives of Love. We are called to worship and wrestle with temptations- both take intentionality. So I ask you today, will we set apart time to see the Holy? Will we allow Bible quoting devils to take away our identity as the children of God? Will we feed only ourselves or feed the hungry? Will faith be a big show or a trust that the Spirit will show up in the wilderness? Will we strive to sit on the throne or to wash one another's feet? Oh, never forget that you are beloved. Take time to cultivate the holy but be intentional about facing your temptations,

so that you stay grounded in God's Love and go forth in Love to live a life of Love.
Amen.