

March 5, 2017



"Authenticity/Courage/Compassion: In Search of the True Self"

Homily by Rev. Robert English

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty 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.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Anyone who follows me on Facebook or anyone who has ever visited my office knows that I love grumpy cat. For those of you who may not be familiar, grumpy cat is a cat who always looks grumpy. And, as with most memes that exist on the internet, images of grumpy cat fly around social media with various funny or ironic captions. So this last Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday, a member of my Facebook community shared a picture on my Facebook page of grumpy cat with the caption, it's the most wonderful time of the year.... Lent.

I've shared before with you all that I love Lent, yes, I do, probably a little bit too much. I love this season where the church sets aside 40 days to spend in meditation, prayer and self-examination. I love that this is a season where we talk about things like sin and self-denial and sacrifice, that we fast from things that we normally enjoy without even having a second thought, ice cream, chocolate, adult beverages.

I like that the outside culture doesn't quite know what to do with this season of confession and repentance; a season where people walk around with ashes, a symbol of their own mortality on their foreheads. Lent isn't very marketable so we get a break from our consumer driven existence.

And, yet, this last Thursday I was in the grocery store shopping when I walked past an end cap, and low and behold what did I see- chocolate Easter bunnies and Peeps making their first appearance on the second day of Lent....

I think I love Lent most of all, because it's a season that the church takes seriously, when we take a step back in our own lives and take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror. This time each year when we become more comfortable with the uncomfortable truths about our own human frailty, more honest about our own human condition, vulnerable enough with ourselves, with our community and with God to acknowledge that we stand in need of God's abundant, overflowing grace, that we rely every day, every moment, on a power greater than ourselves to live this thing we call our life.

We begin our Lenten journey with this reading from Matthew's gospel of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus is led out by the spirit into the desert where he fasts, prays, and pushes his body to the limits of his own existence, into this uncomfortable and unsettling space.

In this raw state he encounters the tempter, the devil, who pushes him internally to the boundaries of what he believes, challenging him and pushing Jesus to feel in every ounce of his being the power and grace of God. Jesus who perseveres, trusting in God first and foremost, above everything else that exists in our world. Jesus, knowing in his very bones, the power of our God, who anoints every part of our existence with life-giving love.

I believe, in this passage, that Jesus is embodying the whole human story, the story of humanity going back to the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years, back to Noah and his family living on the ark for 40 days and 40 nights as it rained and rained and rained, back to Elijah, the prophet, who fasted 40 days for his people to wake up to this truth: God is with us longing for us to live in the way of light and love.

I believe that Jesus is embodying the whole human story, the story of those who had gone on before him, and all of us who would come after, trying to walk in his way, because part of what it means to be human is to be tempted, to go into the wilderness places of our lives, where we strip away everything else that would try to lay claim on us, the layers and layers of self-imposed identities, the masks that we put on every single day.

The wilderness is where we let go of that which we don't need and who we are not, it's where we go to become vulnerable enough, authentic enough, humble enough to acknowledge that which is always true, that our life is not of our own making, it is a gift from God, and in God we move and have our being.

See, Jesus is being challenged by the tempter to forsake his reliance and trust in God and to substitute his own power, his own will. You're hungry, the devil says use your power to take these stones and make them bread,

you're the son of God, prove it, prove your belovedness by throwing yourself from the temple, you want to change the world, I'll give you absolute power in every kingdom, all you have to do is turn away from God.

At the very core of each of these temptations is this question to Jesus and to us: who or what do you rely on? Who or what do you rely on?

Do you rely on your own rugged individualism? Do you rely on your own ingenuity? Your own strength? Do you rely on your national identity, or on your material possessions, your 401k? Do you look to these things, take inventory of these things in order to find a sense of peace, contentment, or meaning?

The story of the temptation of Jesus reminds us that at the center and core of our being, that ultimately we rely on the power of God, a power far greater than ourselves. We are reminded that our trust, our hope, our peace, our security doesn't come from our own ingenuity, our own scheming, our own self-interested ways; our hope, is a hope against hope, it is a trust in the undying, life-giving love of God which transcends all things.

In the wilderness we come to know what we can truly rely on and we come to know all the things we cling to; which are fleeting and will eventually fade away.

See, in the wilderness we come to know that we all stand in need of divine grace, that our human condition contains this underlying truth, in order to live an abundant life, we need help, plain and simple. We need help.

A young mother relayed a story to me of the challenges of parenting a newborn. When her daughter was a few weeks old a friend and her 5 year old daughter were coming over for an afternoon visit. That morning the baby woke up and decided, today's the day that everything is going to fall apart.

The sleeping schedule: out the window, after every feeding: projectile vomiting, diaper changes: oh about one every other minute, meltdowns: how about every hour on the hour. By the time her friend and daughter arrived she was on edge, in the wilderness, raw, vulnerable. She welcomed them in with her newborn in her arms, apologizing for the state of the house, the spit up all over her shirt, all while bouncing the non-sleeping baby in her arms.

After a few minutes the friend asked if she could hold the baby for a minute just to give her a break. As she took this baby into her arms, instantaneously the newborn calmed down and fell asleep within minutes. The 5 year old said wisely- sometimes adults need to ask other adults for help.

If you're like me, you have a hard time asking for help. Sometimes I think to myself- Oh I've got this, which doesn't always work out all that great, or somehow I feel like asking for help is like being defeated, like asking for help from God somehow means I am not worthy of God's love because I haven't got it all figured out, because I'm not perfect.

But, in reality it's our pride, our arrogance, our ego, which won't allow us to seek the help we need in order to be made whole. Sometimes we know that there's something quite not right in our life and we start seeking out ways for us to fix it ourselves.

If I only worked harder and made more money then my life would be perfect, if I only I lost a few pounds or dressed a certain way I'd finally be happy, if I only bounced this crying baby a little bit longer she'll finally drift into peaceful slumber. If only, if only, if only, I did or felt, or believed all these things then I could fix it, save myself and be made whole.

But the truth is folks, the world has a savior and it's not you. It's not up to us alone, we don't have to save ourselves, because God is with us, God's undying love has plunged into all things and anointed every aspect of this human life with God's redeeming power.

This is the good news we have in Jesus Christ, Jesus who is God's abundant compassion, pure unbounded love for you, for me and the whole human family. This love that goes out into wild places for us and with us, this love that endures every test that devil can throw its way, this love that's humble and real and raw and true.

So, during this season of Lent, it's my prayer that we will have enough courage and humility to ask for God's help and to allow the love of God which surpasses all comprehension to make us whole. Thanks be to God. Amen.