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First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 4: 1-11

“Tell Me Something Good”

Jesus was about 30 years old when he was tempted by the devil. Thirty is an interesting age. No longer in your 20s, and well past college, it's about that time people begin to settle down or start to take seri-

ously the fact that they should. Thirty is about the age when people get married for the first time: the average American man is 29, and the average American woman is 27. If you married younger than that, you might have your first child around the age of 30. Maybe even buy your first home. All of these experiences are formative; they're turning points from young adulthood to, well, being a full-blown adult; there's even a new word for it: “adulthood”.

Jesus had a powerful experience at the age of 30 that was formative for him. It happened when his cousin John took him to the Jordan River to be baptized. In that experience he realized who he really was, God's Beloved Son, and that he was different now and because of that the road ahead of him would be different. He now has to decide what to do and how to live out his new sense of God's claim on his life.

And it's precisely at that moment that the Spirit, the Spirit of God, leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. That's important. Because it's not his idea to go into the wilderness. The Spirit leads him there.

Matthew then tells us that Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. And after 40 days of wrestling with the devil, who tempts him to forget everything that happened on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus emerges a new man proclaiming the Good News and telling people to repent of their old ways and join the new way. In 40 days, Jesus shed his old identity and learned to live into his new one, as God's Beloved Son.

In the Bible, a lot happens in 40 days. In the story of the flood, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. And in those 40 days God's anger subsided, and God made a new promise with Noah that a flood of that magnitude would never happen again. In only 40 days, the newly liberated Hebrew people grew tired of waiting for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai and almost blew it by building a golden calf. But in those same 40 days Moses received the ten commandments that made them a covenant people once again.

Forty days is the length of time between Jesus' death and his ascension into heaven. In those 40 days, The disciples went from feeling defeated and dejected to a renewed commitment to carry on Jesus' message of proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom.

In less than 40 days, the Apostle Paul went from a fire-breathing, Christian hating terrorist to the biggest cheerleader for Christ and missionary the church has ever witnessed.

A lot can happen in 40 days. And not just in the Bible. A lot can happen in the world and in our lives in 40 days.

In 40 days, a fragile ceasefire can collapse into violence. In 40 days, a stable market can become uncertain. In 40 days, a national mood can shift from confidence to anxiety—or from fear to hope. We've seen it. We've lived it.

Forty days is long enough for headlines to change, for public opinion to harden, for relationships between nations to strain—or heal. A lot can happen in 40 days.

Forty days can change the course of one person's life: Falling in love, getting married, having a baby, moving, losing a job or changing jobs, unexpected grief, these are periods as short as 40 days that can change the course of one person's life.

During these 40 days of Lent, life around us will change, in subtle ways and maybe dramatic ways that we cannot predict. Things will happen in our world during these 40 days. And things will happen in your life during these 40 days.

Some of these things you do not have control over, but some of them you do. And you do have control over your reaction to things you cannot control. You have a choice to make at these times: will you succumb to the temptation to hang on to old habits, old grudges, old ways of living and doing things? Or will you live into a new way of life and new way of doing things? Jesus had a choice to make: would he succumb to the devil's temptation to keep on living his life as it was, or would he live into his new life, called and claimed by God as God's Beloved Son?

Friends, I want to pause here to point out that the temptations Jesus faced were not necessarily bad. Notice this: the temptations Jesus faced were not invitations to do obviously evil things. They were invitations to do good things in the wrong way.

Turn stones into bread? That would feed hungry people.

Take authority over the kingdoms of the world? That could topple Rome's oppression.

Challenge the religious establishment in Jerusalem? Reform was needed.

None of these are cartoonish acts of wrongdoing. What They are, are shortcuts. They are ways to accomplish something good while serving something less than God. So Jesus says, "No." Not because the needs aren't real, but because his identity matters more. He will not be less than who God has named him to be.

And therein lays the crux of the story. The devil was tempting Jesus to be someone he was not, someone less than who he was called to be. God called Jesus at his baptism no less than the "the Son of God." *Sure, he could have accepted the devil's offers, but then he would have been someone less than he was and someone he was not supposed to be. he wouldn't have been God's beloved son, he would have just been Joseph's boy from Nazareth.*

So here's the question for us: do we ever succumb to that same temptation—to be less than who we are called to be?

We are called the Body of Christ. We are called children of God. We are called bearers of good news. And yet, some days, if we're honest, we settle for being

anxious, reactive, or cynical. We settle for being what I'll gently call "cranky Christians."

But that is not who we are. That is not what we were named at our baptism. We were named God's beloved.

I've been reflecting on this for a while in light of our Lent theme "Tell Me Something Good". One reason the theme resonated with me so much is that I'm sick and tired of hearing bad news, and maybe you are, too. I scroll Facebook and it's just one big gripe fest after another. So many cranky people! Now I don't mean you all. But you know the tone I'm talking about. The constant outrage. The permanent irritation. The sense that everything is falling apart. Nothing can make you believe the world is falling apart quicker than a swipe on social media or the news. And I think we have become victims of that doomsday temptation, way too easily.

You might think, what's the big deal? Do you want us to ignore everything that's wrong with the world? No, of course not. But being purveyors of bad news isn't our calling. Being people of good news is. And good news can be powerful.

A while ago, I read about a couple who made a New Year's resolution to host dinner at their home every single Saturday night for a year. And they did it. Week after week, they gathered people around their table—friends, neighbors, acquaintances, people who disagreed with each other—for food and conversation.

What struck me most was the wife's reflection at the end of the year. She works in politics. She said she had spent years trying to change the world through arguments and advocacy. But nothing she had done felt as powerful as those simple Saturday night dinners.

Because what actually changes the world is not winning arguments. It's building community. It's being anything but cranky!

In a recent column, David Brooks writes that we have become a sadder, meaner, more pessimistic country. One reason, he says, is our obsession with radical individualism. We have forgotten how to belong to one another. His answer is

what he calls “humanism”—a commitment to honoring the dignity of each person, to nurturing the moral and spiritual core of our common life.

I would call that community. I would call that church. I would call that the kingdom of God breaking in—every time someone is seen, heard, and respected; every time a table is set and strangers become neighbors; every time we choose connection over contempt (or crankiness!)

Friends, humanism happens in community. And it happens when we resist the tendency to be cranky. so what can we do? We can begin by recognizing good news when we see it and naming it. This is why this year for Lent, I’m giving up Lent, or at least how we normally observe Lent—which is to say the long funeral march to Good Friday. Instead, I’m taking on a new Lent: one focused on new life, and good things, because Lent is not a march to Good Friday. It’s a march to Easter. And I think we’re better prepared to meet Easter if we are people of good news, noticing the good news around us. Taking a moment to appreciate the good and being grateful. Being an antidote to the sadder, meaner, pessimistic, cranky people. Be people of good news!

And now let’s go back to the beginning.

Before there was a wilderness, there was a river.

Before there was temptation, there was a voice.

“You are my Beloved.”

Only after that does the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness.

Which means the wilderness is not where Jesus proves who he is. It’s where he remembers.

He does not turn stones to bread to prove himself.

He does not seize power to prove himself.

He does not take shortcuts to prove himself.

He already knows who he is.

Friends, so do we.

We were named, too.

Before we were anxious.

Before we were cynical.

Before we were cranky.

We were named Beloved.

So maybe Lent is not about trudging toward Good Friday in gloom and doom.

Maybe it's forty days to practice being steady in a cranky world.

People of hope.

People of community.

People of good news.

People of hope.

People of community.

People of good news.

Tell me something good?

Here it is:

You are God's Beloved.

The Spirit is with you.

And in forty days, a lot can happen.

Amen.

Sources:

For her thoughts related to Lent, credit goes Diana Buler Bass from "The Cottage",
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