

"RESIST"

Genesis 3:1-7 Matthew 4:1-11

March 1, 2020 Lent 1

York Center Church of the Brethren

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(monologue)

Surprised by my appearance? You always are but you shouldn't be. I don't know where you ever got the idea I was red with horns, a tail, and a pitchfork. That would be too easy. But this is me. I look remarkably like you and therein lies my power.

I knew he was coming into his power, discerning his identity and his mission. Jesus, I mean. So I had to jump in right away. He was still damp from the waters of the river when he arrived in the wilderness. When I met up with him he was famished from a forty day fast. He was pretty weak-- so I pounced. That's the best time to strike, you know, the best time to sow doubt or fear or hatred, when someone is lacking something- when they are hungry or think other people are getting more than they are. With some people it is almost too easy- shooting fish in a barrel. But not with Jesus. He was one tough customer.

But me? I have had years of experience and I think I understand God pretty well and I have read the scriptures. I don't agree with them, of course. I think they are rather ridiculous and, even worse, they are dangerous. But I have read them because you have to know your enemy's playbook if you are going to triumph.

Sometimes I amuse myself by just encouraging people to fight over the playbook itself- it keeps them from really reading it and understanding the truth. Because the last thing I want people to understand is the truth, God's truth anyway. I much prefer they believe my truth.

The temptations I offered to Jesus were the exact same ones I offered to the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. I laughed about that one- could God have chosen a more difficult group of people? I don't think so.

"We're hungry."

"Ok, here is some food."

"We're tired of that food. We want something else."

On and on it went for forty years! I just knew God was going to dump them and move on, but God just stuck with them. Couldn't believe that one!

What I have learned over my long and storied career is that you have to keep people looking inward- at themselves, at their own needs, wants, and opinions, because when they start looking outward then they look up and there is God and before long they start thinking about other people and the created world and then I have lost them.

I did my best work with Jesus- I didn't argue with him or berate him. I just offered what he needed at that moment.

"Oh Jesus, you look so hungry. Here, turn these stones into bread before you pass out."

"Oh Jesus, you dear man, these people are so hard- headed, why not give them a spectacle so they will believe in you from day one. Jump off the top spire of the temple. You know as well as I do that God will protect you."

"Oh Jesus, the whole world could be yours. You deserve it! Just drop to your knees and worship me. It will only take a moment and then you can have everything you ever wanted."

But he didn't budge. We quoted scripture at each other- I can toss it around with the best of them- but somehow he seemed to know it better than I. And then I left.

They say angels came and took care of him- whatever. I was already gone- waiting, biding my time for my next opportunity to knock him off course. And there would be another opportunity. There's always another opportunity.

See you around.

Surprised by a visit from the devil this morning? This character is vital to the Lenten journey we are embarking upon. Known in other Gospels as "the Slanderer" and the "Adversary," the character of the devil is a witness to the courage and determination of Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. Each Sunday in Lent we will meet people who met Jesus and through their interactions with him, were changed forever.

Lent is the time in the church year that leads us to Holy Week and Easter. These forty days call us to think deeply about our relationship with Jesus Christ and to contemplate the ways in which we too have been changed by his presence in our lives. We begin this sacred season with two biblical stories one set in a garden and one in a wilderness. But first, a current story.

Most of you know by now that Marty and I added a puppy to our family a few months ago. Codi is now six months old and is full of that seemingly unstoppable puppy energy that sometimes turns him into our very own Tasmanian devil (remember that cartoon?). One minute he will be sweet and cuddly and then next he is a jumping, biting machine. When we were in York recently to visit my family, we met with a dog trainer.

George has developed what he calls, "Focused Based Canine Training." One hour with him and Codi behaved in ways we never thought possible.

George's premise is that your dog needs to keep their focus on you- no matter what. He believes that dogs respond less to talk and more to movement. His goal is to harness the dog's natural desire to win approval and seek direction from you as the pack leader. After working outside with Codi for less than half an hour our puppy sat still for five whole minutes - those of you familiar with puppies know that this is an eternity for a puppy. Then we put a piece of bread slathered with peanut butter on the ground near him and, after being corrected only once, Codi did not make a move to eat it. Marty and I have plenty of work to do to reinforce these lessons, because of course, the training was as much for us as it was for Codi. We learned that the key in training a puppy is: **focus**. If we encourage him to keep his focus on us- good things can happen.

I think our scripture texts for this morning are all about focus. Yes, people are more complicated than puppies- but we can ask ourselves the same questions: Who or what gets our undivided attention? Are we easily distracted?

Let's begin in the garden. In the first two chapters of *Genesis*- God has created the world, all of the animals, and the man and the woman. God gave the humans a home in paradise so they could care for it. They received these simple instructions. *"You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."* (*Genesis 2:16-17*) Chapter two ends with these words, *"And the man and the woman were both naked, and were not ashamed."* (*2:25*)

Then we meet another creature, also created by God, and we are told that he is crafty. We are **not** told that he is the devil- because he isn't. This story could just as easily have included a crafty koala bear- but my guess is that the people who wrote this story were more afraid of snakes than koala bears. Hence, the serpent is the bad guy. The serpent does nothing but talk- he has no ability to act in any other way. And talk he does- slyly taking the focus of the humans off of God- and onto themselves. And we know that doesn't end well. It is interesting to note that the Greek word for "crafty" is a play on the word used for "naked."

The first time the serpent talks he asks what God said. The second time he contradicts what God said. With one comment the serpent raises doubts about God's instructions and suddenly the focus, the boundaries set by God are negotiable in the minds of the woman and the man. And just like that, they are distracted from their purpose and they make a harmful and dangerous choice. Perhaps the woman and the man should have questioned the serpent's authority- checked his credentials and asked exactly where he got his information.

They could have told him to be quiet and go bother someone else. But they didn't. And what had been a beautiful story of trust and obedience now becomes an account of fear and punishment.

This story, we have been told, is the story of "original sin" and the "fall" of humankind. But the word "sin" never appears and the rest of chapter three never mentions punishment or "the fall." (I define sin as anything that separates us from God.)

My Old Testament Professor Dennis Olson suggests that the central aim of *Genesis 3* is to describe the mystery of sin, not to explain its origin. He writes, "*Sin is a mysterious force that arises from within God's good creation. The serpent is simply one of God's creatures. And the yearnings and suspicions of the humans about God's motivations are somehow already embedded within the human heart from the beginning and simply needed the encouragement of the serpent to bring them out and convert them into action. Thus, Genesis 3 is less about 'explaining' the origin of sin and more about describing the reality of what it is to be human and our mysterious human tendencies continually to rebel about God, to resist the gracious boundaries and limitations that God places around us for our own good, and to desire to be like God rather than thankful creatures of God.*"

We find it easy to judge Eve and Adam. After all, they had it made! God put them in a paradise with one job- to take care of each other and the creation and they blew it. They had a personal, intimate relationship with the God who created them and somehow that wasn't enough for them. Instead of keeping their focus on God, they were distracted by the temptation to define themselves apart from God. And suddenly they knew they were naked. Their physical state did not change- but their perception of it did. Shame becomes a part of their reality and their nakedness is now something that must be covered. Once celebrated, now the truth of their existence is something to be ashamed of. And that quickly the relationship between Creator and creation is damaged.

We judge them because we believe that they could have- should have- resisted the wily talk of the serpent- but they didn't. And neither do we.

Now we turn our attention to the story in the wilderness and a very different reaction to distraction. We see in this story from Matthew's Gospel Jesus' lonely and

painful resistance to the power of the devil. Jesus was baptized, his identity was affirmed by the voice of God, and then he was rushed directly by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. After fasting for forty days and forty nights he is confronted by the devil who attempts to distract him from his purpose and identity as the Son of God. Here, between baptism and ministry, Matthew names the reality of evil in the face of holiness. Like Adam and Eve, Jesus is offered the temptation of defining himself apart from his identity in God. Although the first humans succumbed to this seduction, Jesus holds firm. He doesn't lose his focus. In doing so, he not only defines his ministry, he defines ours as well.

In Matthew's Gospel, *"temptation and sin are not merely matters of personal choice, but forces lodged in the social, economic, and political constructions of human life."* (1)

In a world spilling over with distractions- we find ourselves confronted over and over again with the choice of being the people of God- or not. The kind of power the devil offers Jesus is also the kind of power that we find alive and well in our world- the power of domination, exploitation, and manipulation. *"This kind of power divides and destroys, does not care about healing, and is ultimately violent rather than merciful. God's power, as Jesus' ministry will reveal, is inclusive, restorative, healing, and merciful."* (2)

The empires of our world rule by the destructive systems of hierarchy, domination, and violence. God's empire, on the other hand, is built around service, justice, mutuality, sharing, and right relationship. Jesus' resistance against the worldly power offered by the devil and our resistance of the powers of our day constitute rebellions of the most radical kind.

We are living in dangerous times. It often feels as though the powers of evil are prevailing. But in times like these we must not be distracted. We must do all we can to keep our focus on our God and to continue the work of Jesus.

This season of Lent calls us to come face to face with the distractions in our lives, to name them, to understand them, and to choose again and again to remain focused on God. Lent is not a season of guilt. It is a season of acknowledging the realities that we face and remembering that we are forgiven. It is a season of strengthening our spiritual muscles with prayer, worship, fellowship, and education.

Lent does not call us to berate ourselves but instead to celebrate the times that we **do** resist the temptations to be less than we are. My guess is that we resist more often than we succumb to the distractions that pull our attention away from God.

"The temptations Jesus faced and the ones we face aren't temptations to do what we would really like to do, but know we are not supposed to; they are temptations

to be someone other than who God calls us to be, to deny that we are God's beloved children." (3)

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that *"The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are- the good and the bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is. He is the one who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises- speaking to you like someone you have known all your life."*

My prayer for us during this season of Lent is that each one of us will follow Jesus and live lives of Holy Resistance.

Focus people! Focus!

May it be so.

Amen.

End Notes:

- PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, Stanley P. Saunders. Westminster John Knox Press. 2010. P.23.
- P. 24.
- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long. Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P.37