

"Blessed are the Imperfect"
Matthew 4:1-11
February 26, 2023 Lent 1
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Have you heard of "Imposter Syndrome?" It is the belief that you are undeserving of your achievements and the high esteem in which you are held. People who struggle with Imposter Syndrome, which was first named in 1978, feel that they aren't as competent or intelligent as others might think they are. They fear they are fakes. They fear that people will discover that they really don't know what they are doing. I would not be surprised if most, if not all of us, have felt this way at some point in our lives. Studies show that 70% of adults may experience it at least once in their lives.

Most of the pastors I know experience Imposter Syndrome on a regular basis (often weekly when we stand in the pulpit). And we aren't alone. Here are some notable individuals who have talked about their experiences with Imposter Syndrome.

One of the most beloved and well-known actors of this generation, Tom Hanks, when asked if he experienced Imposter Syndrome while filming a movie with Paul Newman said, "Absolutely!"

Michelle Obama, in a 2018 interview, said that it never goes away.

Maya Angelou once said, "I have written 11 books, but each time I think, 'Uh oh, they are going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody and they're going to find me out.'"

Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor, said that as a student at Princeton University and Yale Law School, *"I was always looking over my shoulder, wondering if I measure up."*

This list also includes, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinta Ardern, author Neil Gaiman, actor Emma Watson, and rapper Andre 3000. We are in good company.

Imposter syndrome may be related to our culture's focus on perfectionism. Advertisers try to convince us that the right car, clothing, menu, hobby, bank account, job, vacation, you name it, will take us one step closer to the perfect life everyone wants. That kind of thinking is great for their bottom line but is disastrous for our emotional and mental health. Can we all agree that perfection isn't even possible? I find freedom in acknowledging that we are among the imperfect yet deeply loved children of God.

The season of Lent- the forty days leading to Easter (not counting Sundays)- is not the time of "bad news" that we just have to trudge through so we can get to the "good news"

of Easter. It is a time of grace when the people of Christ reflect on their mortality and sin, as well as on the creative and re-creative powers of God which transform us.

Our worship themes during Lent come from a sermon guide called "Bless The Lent We Actually Have." Created by Kate Bowler and her "Everything Happens Project," and written by Brenda Thompson and Jessica Richie, this guide offers reflections on the ways in which the imperfect lives we live are blessed by God. It acknowledges the fact that as humans, we are imperfect with broken bodies, broken relationships, and sometimes broken spirits. It is in our brokenness and imperfection that we find an ally in Christ, the one who shares in our humanity. In naming our need and frailty, we receive renewal and compassion from God who never asked us to perfect in the first place.

"Lent is the season of repentance- a chance to acknowledge our limitations, our humanity, our failures, our sins, and recognize our utter dependence on God for our every breath." (1)

Let us enter this season of Lent and learn how to allow God to bless us through our imperfections, through the lives we actually have.

A lot is packed into the first four chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and it is all pointing to the true identity of Jesus, setting the stage for his ministry. Matthew starts in chapter one with a 17 verse genealogy which begins with Abraham and ends with Jesus. Matthew then reports the birth of Jesus through the lineage of Joseph and leads us to the visit of the Wise Men and their revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. We see the horror of Herod's massacre as Mary and Joseph escape with their child to Egypt where they live as refugees until it is finally safe to return home. This is all in just the first two chapters.

Chapter three skips right to adulthood and John the Baptist who calls the people to repent as a way to prepare the way for the Messiah. The day Jesus shows up John acknowledges him as the One they have been waiting for and then, reluctantly, baptizes him. As Jesus comes up out of the water the Holy Spirit comes down like a dove and rests on him. And a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The identity of Jesus could not be much clearer. So it is a bit of a surprise when we read that the Holy Spirit immediately leads Jesus to the wilderness. This wasn't a post baptism silent spiritual retreat. This was Messiah boot camp. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and then, when he was at his weakest, hungriest, most exhausted point, he was tested by the devil.

The word "devil" used by Matthew is drawn from two Greek words which mean to "throw over or across." It essentially means "one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits, slanders." We find the devil in this text as one who tries to divert Jesus from claiming his true identity as the Son of God.

It is not a coincidence that immediately after Jesus's true identity is announced publicly, he is tested by the devil, the one who represents all that opposes the will of God. In facing these three temptations, Jesus had to look closely at himself, decide who he really was, own his identity, and decide what kind of messiah he would be.

In that lonely and desolate place Jesus affirmed his holy calling and he determined the shape and nature of his ministry. The devil shows his craftiness when he says, "**IF** you are the Son of God." He didn't say "**since** you are the Son of God," or "**because** you are the Son of God." He said, "**If**," which is a very effective way of raising self-doubt. Nice try, but it didn't work. Jesus wasn't fooled by semantics. Even in his weakest moment, even in a time of great need, Jesus knows who he is and whose he is. He turns to God and God's word for confirmation of his identity and role.

Before Jesus could begin his ministry as the Messiah, he first had to discover the sort of Messiah he would **not** be. Jesus rejected the lies of the devil and turned away from the slippery promises of self-serving power and prestige. Even more than the announcement at his baptism, this time of testing in the wilderness reveals who Jesus really is.

Forty days of fasting and testing in the wilderness allows Jesus to retrace the adventures of the Hebrew people as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness.

Tom Long writes: "*Because the temptations Jesus faced are echoes of Israel's temptations, the first readers of Matthew, with their ready knowledge of what we now call the Old Testament, would recognize that Jesus is on familiar ground here, re-enacting the story of the trials of God's people. Jesus has inherited the legacy of Israel, and now he goes where they went- into the wilderness- to experience what they experienced- a time of testing.*

Where they failed, he is faithful. Where they stumbled, he walks surely and unwaveringly along the path of God's calling. All that God willed to create in Israel has now come to fruition in this beloved son, Jesus. What this means is that the temptations Jesus encountered are not his alone; they are his, of course, but they are also the temptations of all God's people. Israel faced them; and what is important for us today- the church continues to face them.

The ways in which Jesus was tested symbolize all of the possibilities for doubt, misdirection, faithless choices, and unholy distractions to which God's people are ever at risk. (2)

Long reminds us that "*The testing of Jesus, the testing of Israel before him, and the testing of the church today are not primarily temptations to **do** what we would really like*

to do, but know we shouldn't; they are temptations to be someone other than who God calls us to be, to deny that we are God's children."

The temptations the devil threw at Jesus were mainly about meeting his own needs, testing God's faithfulness, and choosing whom to serve. Food, power, and leadership. Jesus was tempted with self-interest. He was invited to choose an easier path; to choose between two opposing authorities, two types of existence, two ways of defining himself. In an effort to distort Jesus's identity, however, the devil actually confirms it.

This story told Matthew's readers- and it tells us- that there is no place so desolate, so distant, so challenging that we may find ourselves that Jesus has not already been there. There is no test, no temptation we may face that he has not already faced and overcome.

I don't think Jesus was tested for himself. I think he already knew who he was. I think he was tempted for us- for those who would follow him. In each case, Jesus rejects the temptation and bases his identity and future on God's character and trustworthiness. I think we can be pretty sure that Jesus didn't suffer from Imposter Syndrome. Others were confused about who he was, but he wasn't confused.

Those of us who find the wilderness a place of beauty and renewal may be a bit uncomfortable with the way wilderness is portrayed in scripture. In the Bible, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's response, a place of learning to trust in God. But it is also a place of chaos, struggle, and danger.

I think we have walked through a biblical wilderness period these past few years. The Covid pandemic shook up our world in ways we had never experienced or expected. Like people all over the world our normal routines were interrupted and in some cases, ceased altogether.

We had to learn new ways of living and being and surviving. It is a collective trauma that has affected all of us and will affect us for years to come. Our congregation has changed significantly since March of 2020, and we are still trying to figure out what that means for our mission and ministry.

Our congregation, and me personally, had our own wilderness experience last year in the aftermath of my fall. Add that to the trauma of the Covid years and you can see that we have certainly been through a time of struggle and difficulty. Our wilderness journey has been a time of chaos and uncertainty but here we are- ready to move forward.

The questions for us now are:

- Where is the Spirit leading us today and in these coming days of Lent?
- What is our identity right here and right now in 2023?
- Who is God calling us to be as a congregation?
- Who is God calling us to be as individual disciples?
- What need in this world are we called to address?
- How are we called to be "Jesus in the neighborhood" in **this** neighborhood?
- How can we, as imperfect but blessed people, shine the light of God's love in this world?

These are not easy questions to answer. They take time

and prayer and deep commitment. The answers to similar questions we may have found five or ten years ago were important for that time, but are no longer sufficient for who we are right now.

I believe our call for this season of Lent is to really be who we are and not be tempted to be who we are not. We have been called to this place for such a time as this. We have suffered together in the wilderness. We have survived difficult times and unfair tests and we have done it together, as a community of faith.

Throughout his life, Jesus stayed true to who he was. His identity as God's Son was clear in everything he did and everything he said. We aren't called to be Jesus. We aren't called to be perfect. We are called to claim our place as God's beloved, imperfect people.

We are not alone in the wilderness of uncertainty. Jesus was here first, and he remains with us- even now.

We are not imposters. We are God's imperfect, yet perfectly loved daughters and sons.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.