First Sunday of Lent The Great Litany/Year A

All Saints’ Church March 5, 2017

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19

Psalm 32 Matthew 4:1-11

O Dear Lord, we pray, create in us clean hearts. Amen

No matter the liturgical year, we always start the first Sunday in Lent with the reading of the temptations of Jesus in the desert.

Jesus was just baptized in the River Jordan by John. The skies break open and God declares to Jesus, “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.”

And then without a moment’s chance to revel in that revelation, Jesus is sent off to the desert to be tempted by the devil. Jesus is led by the angels. The whole thing seems God-designed. That should give us our first clue that this God business is tricky stuff.

Somehow, these 40 days and 40 nights of an extreme fast are necessary for Jesus, before he starts his ministry. And we are reminded today of that necessity, just as Jesus is ending his wilderness experience, we are starting ours. We begin our own fast by committing to a time of reflection, repentance and renewal as a way to receive the mystery of Easter.

Rather than focus on Jesus’ identity in this story this morning, I invite us to imagine ourselves in the desert and explore our own identity as the Body of Christ.

The Devil begins with Jesus, “If you think you are the Son of God, then do these things…. to prove it.”

The Devil is speaking to us as well. This is our first temptation, foundational to all sins: to doubt that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God.

Oh, those demons who come late at night, attacking you when you are vulnerable and afraid: You really think you are the beloved of God? How can you be so audacious? You, who sin and fail in so many ways through your fear and anger and doubt; your pettiness, greed, anxiety, impatience, and hubris often rule the day. Who do you think you are? You, worthy of God’s lavish love? What have you done to deserve that? Nothing. Think again!

Yet, here we are claiming this truth. God so loved us, his gave us his only Son, and that Jesus is willing to die for us, rather than turn away from his abiding love for us.

So we reject that first temptation to live in shame or doubt or guilt and to see ourselves as God sees us: perfect, just as we are.

Imagine we are standing firm in our knowledge that we are God’s beloved. Now here come the next powerful temptations. Three of them.

God, if I am your beloved, then turn the stones of my life into bread…. Pretty please! Make my life good in my own image of what good is. Take away my suffering and the suffering of my loved ones and friends. Please fix things. Can we work together on an alternative life which protects me from pain and feeds me with the bread of success and happiness.

Jesus is right with us in the wilderness of that first temptation, whispering in our ears Scripture that will help us defy the devil…. Remember, the first shall be last; you will need to lose yourself to find yourself; blessed are those who mourn.

And just as we are trying to absorb Jesus’ help to recognize the True Bread, the second temptation appears.

God, if I am your beloved, then can you prove to me your existence? This faith stuff is difficult. It will be much easier for me to take your Bread, to lose myself into you, to trust that my mourning, my suffering, is blessed, if I know, without a doubt, that you are Real, that you exist. I don’t think I am asking that much. Just prove it to me. Give me a sign, empirical evidence, something, anything, that I can rely on.

Jesus sides right up to us, sighing…. “Oh dear ones, you faithless generation, always asking for a sign, for proof. Why do you think healing your infirmities are greater than forgiving you, releasing you from guilt and shame? The throngs of the masses are following Jesus hoping for a miraculous healing. Jesus out of his love heals; maybe he just can’t help himself, and yet, he also tells his disciples, “Don’t tell anyone…. ***Proof is*** ***not*** what the Kingdom of God is about.”

And just as we are trying to absorb Jesus’ challenge to reject the need for empirical evidence, the third temptation appears.

God, if we are your beloved, then give us all the power of the world, especially so we can rule over our enemies. We’ll make things right and great and then we can trust in the Kingdom of God to which you keep referring. Make us the star of our own reality shows, celebrities in our own right, who have power, who are significant, who show up on the front page of the newspaper as important, as deal makers, as deal breakers, who will live eternally with lasting legacies.

By the way, this last temptation, may be the greatest temptation for the Church: the Adam and Eve temptation- the genesis of all sins: to want to be like God. The Church will become the imperial dynasty that will dominate the world, a royalty of Divine Rule that will provide for the masses. We will cure you, shape you, even save you, all for God’s sake, making our nations our heritage, and the ends of the earth the Church’s possession.

And we wonder why there are so many wars fought in the Name of God.

Jesus is right with us in our wilderness of needing, wanting, and abusing power, and he calls a child to be in the center of our world… let the little children come to you, do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Real power is not recognized by the world. Your power is in your powerlessness, in your vulnerabilities, in your willingness to be open and to let God’s power live through you. What profit will you show if you gain the whole world, yet destroy yourself in the process?

There’s really no great surprise here- Jesus is walking with us in our wilderness, whispering in our ears, giving us the necessary Scripture to defy the devil: the more we let God be within us, the more we become our true selves, the person who God created for us to be.

Minda Cox, is a woman born with no arms and no legs; she was adopted and raised by a mother who is an Episcopal priest and who adopted three children, all who had been abandoned. Minda wrote the Forward Day by Day reflections for this past February.

She starts her month of insights, with a story about the way people view her and her sisters when they are out in public- one blind, one in an electric wheelchair, one with crutches. They were at a fair when a couple came up to them and prayed for healing for her sister Jaya. “It was weird,” she writes. “She didn’t feel sick…. For us, competency with crutches, canes, and wheelchairs, despite the reasons for needing these tools, were signs of our wholeness.

“The couple who approached my sister seemed to view sickness or disability as a manifestation of God’s disfavor. This worried them. If Jaya had thrown her crutches down and walked away without a limp… they might have believed she had been miraculously made whole. But it would have been a sign to Jaya that God had not already formed her perfectly, just as she was!” *Cox, Minda, (Cincinnati, OH, Forward Movement, 2017).*

Jesus will not turn our stones into bread; he will not prove God to us by performing miracles on demand, nor will he turn away from God to embrace our false image of power.

Jesus is himself, steadfast, the incarnation of True Love, calling to us to Follow….. he doesn’t say much more than that. “Follow me.” You decide. And know that this decision to be with Jesus is the decision to follow and to be free, to be free to manifest the Glory of God. AMEN.