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Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for 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.

SERMON

LENT is a time to see who we truly are.

This familiar story has something to teach us about seeing who we truly are.

This story is the connective tissue between two other foundational stories -

Jesus baptism, where the Spirit of God descended as a dove, and a voice proclaimed: "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased",

and Jesus' stepping into public ministry, with his first words being: Change, Repent, turn to God, the kingdom is here.

This story, that links his belovedness and belonging, named before he'd done anything, with the proclamation of his mission - this is the place; the wilderness, where he lives into the question:

What is belonging to God going to mean?

What does it mean to belong to God?

Jesus is led into the wilderness. This same spirit who descends upon him, names his belonging, this Spirit leads him out...

So much could be said about the wilderness - it is both barren, and desolate, and a place of hidden abundance, where streams are tucked into hillsides, and diversity is hidden in cracks and crevices.

It's in the wilderness that Jesus finds himself alone, for a long time, a biblical time, 40. 40 days, bringing the listener back to the life of Moses, to the wandering Israelites meandering through the wilderness for 40 years.

Jesus, what does it mean to belong to God? The deceiver asks, after those 40 days.

Karoline Lewis¹, from Luther seminary, suggests that it's here, in the wilderness that Jesus is working out his own identity.

These temptations are a time of Jesus figuring out what it means to belong to God.

What is that belonging to God going to mean for him? What will that loyalty and obedience to this mission require?

¹ [Sermon brainwave #890](#). 2/20/23

These temptations are a time of deep wrestling - will Jesus be obedient to his belonging to God?

Will Jesus turn toward God, or turn away?

It's here, in this wild space that Jesus leans into who he is.

Lent - Lent is a time to step into the wilderness with Jesus and see who we truly are.

What does it mean to belong to God?

Somehow it means belonging to one another.

Relationship with God, with our sisters and brothers.

Belonging to God involves an ongoing commitment of recognizing and affirming our identity, and one another's identity, as ones who belong.

Several months ago I started occasionally going to the AA meetings held here in our building.

They're open meetings, meaning that anyone can attend - those seeking support for addiction, family members, friends, people like me who want to learn.

I went because I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn about what it means to honestly name the places that we meet in our times of wilderness - name the places of deception in our lives, and to be held and loved into wholeness by a community.

I wanted to learn what it means to turn toward others and towards God, in our pain, instead of away.

And what I have witnessed is a deep sense of belonging.

Early in every meeting, there is a recognition of important dates, anniversaries of sobriety. The first time I went, one member was marking 15 years. What I noticed was that someone already knew that. Before the anniversary was named, they'd taken the 15 year chip out of the box with lots of little cubbies and chips, each with a time period stamped on them. Someone there knew that today was a special day, and they were ready - the chip held, and reverently given in celebration.

You belong, that gesture said. And we stand with you, every day, as you struggle to stay clean.

When I show up, which is sporadic, I'm met with a sense of welcome that feels so genuine, it warms me to the core. Deep in my belly.

This last time, just this week, mid-meeting, the woman next to me slipped a black and white tri-fold pamphlet to me on which she and 3 others had written their names and phone numbers. Am I supposed to pass this along?, I whispered, not sure where it was to go next. No, it's for you, she said. In case you want to talk.

You belong. You belong, not just when you show up well dressed and put together. You belong in the midst of your darkest moments, when you're in the wilderness and the voice of the Tempter is real and loud and knocks you off balance. You belong. Always, and we're here with you.

In that gesture of sliding that piece of paper across the table to me, she was silently telling me: We don't know the way the Deceiver works in your life, but we know it's real. And we know it's hard to face alone.

You belong.

I sat there and shed some tears.

Stories of brokenness and hope bind that community. They are raw, real and hold the uncertainty of not knowing how this all will end. Little is certain - there is a sense of wilderness living.

Hearing a person, more than 20 years sober, humbly speak aloud how some days he hears the tempter telling him that 1 little drink is OK... and how hard it is to hear anything else.

And he knows, he knows he belongs to something larger than that deceptive voice within.

He knows

He, too, is a child of God. He belongs to a power greater than himself.

He knows

He has sponsors he can call. He has this community to turn to.

He belongs.

Jesus is in the wilderness - that place that is both barren and abundant.

The deceiver asks, in seductive ways: Who are you Jesus? Whose are you, Jesus?

Jesus, what does it mean to belong to God?

These are questions that we might carry into lent. For

LENT is a time to see who we truly are.

Jesus responds to the deceiver with words that live deep in his bones - quotations from his scriptures. Words that proclaim that he chooses to turn toward God, not away.

And when he leaves that place of wilderness and begins his ministry, his first words are:

CHANGE, REPENT, the kingdom of God is close...

Repent, change, it's that greek word metanoia. Turn. It means to turn.

This metanoia, change -

It's not about turning away - it's about turning toward God.

In each of these wilderness temptations, Jesus turns towards God.

Just as those in that basement AA meeting turn toward their higher power, and toward one another.

The book of Deuteronomy, which Jesus quotes all 3 times, this book ends with those wandering Israelites being given a profound choice - you either choose to turn toward God, which is life, or you turn away from God, which is death.

Who are you? Whose are you?

Where do you turn? To whom do you turn?

Lent is a time to see who we truly are. It's a time of choosing to turn towards, to take on practices or perspectives that deepen our identity as children of God.

Our lenten materials this year invite us to seek and deepen our belonging to God- with questions such as:

In what ways can you grow closer to God?

Are you using your time wisely?

Is there a spiritual practice you'd like to develop?

They're each another way of saying - how might you repent? Change? Turn towards God, towards life, not away...

We seek this Lent - seek to turn towards - recognizing the ways the deceiver works in our lives, drawing us to distractions of all sorts.

Seeking - together.

References:

[Sermon brainwave #890](#). 2/20/23

[Pulpit fiction](#) podcast. Lent 1A.