Sermon 3-1-20

Jesus and Mosquito Bites

Matthew 4:1-11

In 1985, Steven Spielberg directed the film, *The Color Purple*, based on the book of the same name.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whoopi Goldberg received a Gold Globe Award for Best Actress for her role as Celie Harris Johnson in 1986.

In the book, author Alice Walker presents a conversation between Celie and Shug that is worthy of the halls of any of our United Methodist seminaries. **GRAPHIC: The two women are walking through a field of purple flowers, and the beauty of the sight raises for them the issue of the nature of God.** Shug suggests that God made the flowers so beautiful because, more than anything else, God loves admiration. When Celie asks her if that means God is vain, Shug answers by saying, “Naw.” She continues, “Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it [makes] God [angry] if you walk by the color purple . . . somewhere and don’t notice it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, let me ask, have we noticed? The white of Christmas is ancient past. The green of Epiphany has been folded and hung in the closet. Purple has appeared in their place. It slipped in on Wednesday when we are usually only here for meetings or classes, so it might be easy to have gone unnoticed. And if I hadn’t called your attention to it today, you’d still have forty days ahead of us to take notice. You see, Lent is all about taking notice.

But taking notice of what? That’s the question. Surely, it’s more than just taking notice of God’s gift of purple. It’s taking notice of God’s gift of . . . **GRAPHIC: Well, maybe it’s best to enter from the side door.**

Lent began in the early church as a period of preparation for baptism of converts. **GRAPHIC: These converts would study the Bible and the faith intensely, they would pray constantly, and they would fast rigorously**. It was a time to test out whether you really wanted to be a Christian or not. Do I really believe this stuff? Do I really want to live this Christian life? It is supposed to be different from the way other people live, you know. When you have faith in Christ and live in Christ, your life in the world doesn’t buy into all the rhetoric about what a good worldly life is all about.

So, Lent evolved as a period for converts to try on the clothes of the Christian and see how they fit for a while before you decided to take that step on Easter and be baptized into wearing Christ forever. You know, in the early church they symbolized that **GRAPHIC: Baby** by stripping naked before getting into the baptismal waters and then being clothed in a new white robe when they stepped out. Doing that in front of the whole church takes some guts, some real commitments.

It's no wonder then that the early church used the story of Jesus’s temptation as the lens for interpreting this trial period. One thing you might notice about the story is that Lent seems to get the order backward. We test our faith before deciding to commit. But in the Gospels, Jesus is baptized and then has his faith tested. But let’s be clear. In the story, Jesus isn’t someone who is lost like Hansel and Gretel and accidentally stumbles upon Satan’s gingerbread house out in the wilderness. Satan doesn’t sing a Siren’s song that seduces Jesus into coming out to the wilderness.

No, indeed, the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus after his baptism and then this very Spirit that has come from God, that is somehow God, *leads* Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. There is intentionality here. Jesus doesn’t just happen to be tested when he is in the wilderness; he goes out there *in order to be tempted*. I mean, for heaven’s sake, he fasts for forty days so *that* he will be tempted.

That’s where it comes from, you know. Lenten discipline, that is. Modeled on Jesus fasting for forty days while being tempted by the devil. During Lent**, GRAPHIC: we abstain from something insignificant that we desire** (chocolate, soft drinks, television, wine, for time for prayer, Bible study, or volunteer work) *so that* we will be tempted to desire it all the more.

Lent is temptation practice, if you will. We take on small temptations to rehearse for times when serious temptation comes knocking at our door and rattling our windows. We take on small disciplines so that we are ready for those hard, trying times in life when only self-discipline can get us through. Think of it this way. Lent is like intentionally letting yourself get bitten by mosquitoes *so that* you can practice resisting the temptation to scratch **GRAPHIC: when you get a bad case of poison ivy. Notice I didn’t say *if* you get a bad case of poison ivy; I said *when*.**

Go outside the city and everyone stumbles into poison ivy now and then. It’s everywhere. It’s unavoidable. But if you scratch you will make it so much worse. When you don’t have the self-discipline not to scratch it, you spread it around with your fingertips. It moves from the back of your hand, all up your arm; it shows up on your cheek; it gets inside your eye. In Lent, we allow ourselves to be bitten by mosquitoes so that we can practice not scratching while the itch is fairly mild so that we will be able to resist scratching when the itch is almost unbearable.

So, what is this bad case of poison ivy for which we prepare in Lent? What is the real temptation for which we’re rehearsing? Matthew provides and answer.

Now I know we’ve all heard sermons on the **Graphic: story of Jesus’s temptation that look at each temptation separately.**  First, there’s the temptation to turn stones into bread. Second, if he were to jump down from the steeple on top of the temple in Jerusalem, God would prevent him from even stubbing his toes and everyone would believe. And third, Satan promises that if Jesus worships him for just a moment, her will give to him authority over all the kingdoms of the world. Physical desire, the quest for power, and the lure of glory. Heck, it’s a ready-made three- point sermon if I’ve ever heard one in my life. All preachers have to do is add two jokes and a poem, and they’re ready to fly.

But to walk through each movement of the story and separate them out as different temptations is to risk not seeing Jesus’s wilderness for the trees. The three different tests are really only different on the surface. Down deep where the soul is touched, there is only one temptation – one temptation that manifests itself in millions of different ways.

Listen to the first words the tempter says **GRAPHIC: “If you are the Son of God . . .” (Matt 4:3 NRSV).** Those words echo back to Jesus’s baptism, where the Spirit of God descends upon him, and the voice from heaven says, “This is my son, whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him” (Matt 3:17). Immediately upon hearing these words at baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. And the next words he hears are, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (4:3 NRSV). The second temptation begins the same way: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down” (v. 6 NRSV).

This is my Son . . . If you are the Son of God . . .

The focus here isn’t so much on satisfying hunger or on performing miracles for show or on gaining political power as it is on the temptation of Jesus to act in a way that denies his identity as God’s child. Of course, Matthew uses the title “Son of God” not just to speak of Christ’s divine origins, but also to refer to his divine mission, because Jesus’s identity and mission can’t be separated.

Jesus comes from God as God’s child *in order to* serve God’s people. Jesus is to meet the hungering need of those whom society is either unable or unwilling to help. Jesus is to confront those religious authorities who are more concerned with the religious institutions than with compassion and justice. Jesus is to preach about the dominion of God over against the dominions of the world in a way that calls those willing to hear the message to a posture of repentance. Jesus is to suffer, die, and be raised for those who follow, for those who forsake, for those who are forlorn, and for those who need forgiveness. The temptation Jesus faces in the wilderness is to turn away from the calling he received in his baptism.

This is what God gets angry about if we pass through our baptism and fail to notice: that God calls us. In theological lingo, the word is **GRAPHIC: vocation**, but when we hear that we usually think about career choices. Vocation in the church isn’t about *what* you want to be when you grow up; it’s about *who* God calls us to be in every moment of our existence – at work, at school, at home, at church, at the gas station, at the basketball game, at the quilting bee or sewing club . . . well, you get the idea. In baptism God calls us to the vocation of being Christian everywhere and all the time. Temptation doesn’t simply challenge what we are going to do in this or that circumstance. It’s not just, am I going to cheat on my taxes, cheat on my spouse, cheat on my homework? Temptation makes us question who we are . . . or better, *whose* we are. Temptation challenges us to cheat on being Christian, to cheat our very God-given identity.

**GRAPHIC: In baptism God speaks to us and says, *“You are my child.” (Davis Webb video).***  This is both claiming and calling for Christians. But it’s not that God only says it once. It echoes through every prayer we utter when we believe God cares: “You are my child.” It echoes through every sermon you hear preached in this place: “You are my child.” **GRAPHIC: It echoes through the Lord’s Supper: “This is my body. This is my blood. *You* are my child.”**  Thank heavens we have heard God claim and call us.

I say “thank heavens,” because once we’ve heard it, once we know it, once we believe it, once we choose to wear the label, “Christian,” we are protected from ever being tempted again. That’s right: we Christians are never again tempted the way the rest of the human race is tempted. Being persons of faith protects us from real, root-level temptation. After all, we will never be tempted in a time of economic recession to be concerned about our well-being while neglecting the needs of those who are poor and hungry. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We’ll never be tempted to determine our self-worth by how much money we make or what grades we earn or who we marry or what job title we have. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We’ll never be tempted to mistake the church building for the church in mission. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We’ll never be tempted to allow our love for our nation to distort our claims about God’s love for all God’s people. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We’ll never be tempted to laugh at a joke that demeans someone different than us, whether they be gay, or blond, or black, or old, or Jewish. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We’ll never be tempted in our prayers to transform the creator of the universe into a Santa Claus who should be at our beck and call. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We’ll never be tempted to look at the problems that show up on the evening news and say, “I am only one person, what can I do?” *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We will never be tempted to feel jealous of churches that have something we don’t or boastful before churches that do not have what we do. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We will never be tempted to put our family, our job, our schoolwork, our possessions, our church, our love for Kings basketball, our bank account, our country, our beliefs, or ourselves before God. *If you are a child of God, then . . .*

We who are called Christian, we who God calls, are constantly tempted to forget *who* we are, to forget *why* we are, to forget *whose* we are. Lent is not as fun as Christmas – we don’t have any Lenten carols. We need time to rehearse with small temptations, so that we are ready when louder, more persuasive temptations come along. We need Lent to remind us of our daily vocation of being a Christian. We need Lent to help us notice once again and strive to live out the promise implicit in God saying to each of us every moment of our lives, “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.”

Don’t pass by purple without noticing. Don’t pass by without noticing God calling us to the Christian life. Practice – don’t’ scratch. **GRAPHIC: Whose, are you?**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Scripture Reading for March 1, 2020

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty night, and afterward 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.

1. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 178 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)