

Kiama Jamberoo Uniting Church
Lent 1
9.30am, Sunday 1 March 2020
Kiama

Courage to Enter

Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

⁶saying 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." '

⁷Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection

Let us pray...

Christ Jesus, turn our hearts and minds once more to you.

Help us to engage with your story and to shape our lives to reflect more of you. Amen.

Who can tell us what the word "disciple" means?

A disciple is one who learns.

The disciples of Jesus Christ learn from Jesus - from his life and teaching.

In preparation for Easter, for millenia, the Church has used the 40 (plus a few) days prior to Easter to focus on what it means to be disciples of Christ. In many traditions, it is a time spent preparing people for baptism, and in some traditions, if someone had been particularly naughty and temporarily excommunicated, this preparation time was used to help them re-connect, and to re-engage with the aim that would be received back into the communion of saints at Easter time.

So I am hoping that in this time of preparing ourselves for the Easter celebrations, we all might make an intentional effort to keep learning, to deepen our commitment to learn from Jesus.

So where do we begin?

According to the gospel writers, the events in the wilderness take place right after Jesus' baptism.

The gospel writers use a word to suggest that Jesus is spiritually impelled into the wilderness.

After this amazing experience of God's presence and love, after a compelling affirmation of who he is, God's beloved son, Jesus takes himself into a place of solitude and sparsity / scarcity, a time of fasting and praying.

The big question of who he is has been answered for him - the voice of God at his baptism named and claimed him to be a beloved child of God.

Now he needs to figure out what that means for his life and ministry.

And this is the same question for us.

We are assured again and again of God's love for us.

Today, we are being asked to examine what that means for our lives and ministry.

The wilderness can be a scary place.

Perhaps it is the physical lack of food, water and shelter or the threat of wild animals or bugs.

Perhaps it is more about being lost in a space that is unfamiliar and just a little bit lonely. For many of us, the most scary part of being in the wilderness is being alone with ourselves.

Still, just as Jesus was, we are from time to time, impelled into the wilderness - compelled, perhaps, to remove ourselves from the familiarity and comfort of our everyday existence and to spend time on our own seeking a deeper engagement with our Creator.

In the wilderness, we are told, Jesus fasted and prayed.

We are all pretty familiar with prayer, I hope - although we mostly know that we could always spend more time in intentional prayer.

[If you are interested in exploring how to develop a life of prayer - a life lived where every breath is prayer - I recommend Brother Lawrence's little book, *Practicing the Presence of God*.]

Fasting, on the other hand, is something that has seemingly disappeared from our Christian practice.

Fasting is a practice embraced by many religious traditions - seen as a way of removing the distractions of the world in order to focus more deeply, usually the divine call on our lives.

For us who live in a world of abundance, where anything we want is virtually at our fingertips, the idea of deliberately giving something up, seems difficult for us to grasp. And maybe that is because we read this story and think that we have to give up food and drink for 40 days for it to do any good! And we know that medically that is not a smart idea.

Well, no!

But it seems to me we have thrown the baby out with the bath water.

Fasting doesn't mean having nothing at all for 40 days.

Or it can mean missing a meal or a couple of meals. Or simplifying a meal.

Or it can mean choosing not to eat meat - for one meal or many - that's where the idea of having only fish on Fridays comes from.

It can mean as little as missing a morning cup of coffee, or that evening glass of wine, in order to spend time in prayer.

For the 21st century, it might mean missing your favourite TV show, or reducing the time you spend on social media each day so that you can spend time in prayer or learning or maybe even learning with others in a small group.

Perhaps it means buying less stuff for a while - how many of us bought new clothes yesterday at the fashion parade? How many of us can't go into Bunnings without coming out with more than we went for, and probably a sausage sandwich as well! It might mean "de-cluttering" stuff or even our diaries - all the things that keep us busy, keep us from stopping long enough to engage with the voice of God who longs to engage with us.

It really doesn't matter what it is, what matters is being intentional and then using that intention to turn your heart and mind toward God.

After Jesus has been in the wilderness for 40 days, fasting and praying, it is very likely that he was very hungry and perhaps a bit weary.

We can't be sure that it was 40 days precisely - because we know that 40 days is a symbolic number throughout the Scriptures. It definitely wasn't the 40 days plus Sundays that is our current Lenten practice!

However, long it was, it was certainly long enough for him to be hungry and weary.

None of this comes without effort - fasting and praying take effort and energy.

And I don't know about you, but when I get hungry and tired, I often get a little bit grumpy too!

And it is when Jesus is hungry and tired (and perhaps a bit grumpy), that the gospel writer tells us, the tempter or the devil comes to him.

One day we will have a longer conversation about how we understand the role of the devil in the Scriptures and in the world. But for now, the gospel writers personify the accuser, the one bringing questions to Jesus about who he is and who he will be. It is not so much a tempting, but a probing - asking questions of his identity and understanding of God's call on his life.

The first two questions posed to Jesus, "If you are God's son..." IF you are the Son of God...

These questions probe at Jesus' identity in God.

And Jesus needs to struggle with what he has just heard back in the river.

"This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Was that true? Did that happen? Is that who I am? And if, so, what does and will it mean for me?

And Jesus reply to the accuser is an affirmation - not "if I am" but BECAUSE I am.

Because I am God's son, I choose not to attract the adulation of the crowds, I choose not to misuse my power, rather I choose to be human, vulnerable, to live, work, testify, suffer and die, as a human does. Because I am God's Son, I need God's presence in order to be anything God calls me to be.

As Jesus struggles with the questions posed to him, he chooses to be who the voice at his baptism affirmed that he is.

And so when the ordeal ends, he leaves the desert and immediately starts preaching the reign of God - and we know where that takes him...

So when we take time to really focus on who we are and who we are called to be - when we are confronted with different narratives the world throws at us about who we are and who we are called to be, perhaps we can think of it this way...

Do we believe the voice from the desert - you need to prove yourself.

Or do we believe the voice from the river - you are my child, who is loved.

And as we embrace the assurance that we are loved, children of God. What, then, does this mean for us as we engage with the community around us?

Who will we be?

Do we think we need to prove ourselves? Do we get distracted by the lies the world tells us?

Or do we know that in the company of the God of Love, we are enough.

This time of preparation, these next several weeks, present to us an opportunity to pause:

- to de-clutter or simplify some part of our lives
- or to learn again what it means to fast - to shed something of life's excess - in order to make space to focus and to listen for the voice of God
- to spend time in prayer
- to spend time reading the stories of Jesus and engaging with others in thinking about what they mean for us

And as you do, may you find yourself embraced by a Loving God who calls us to return. May you know yourself named and claimed as loved children of the world's Creator. And may you find yourself then sent into the world to proclaim the way that Jesus showed us.

God of all peoples,

Grant us the courage to intervene when we sense injustice.

May we speak generosity into scarcity and use the power of our presence only for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Remind us of the privilege it is to know who we are and our place in the order of your creation. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield

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