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Psalm 32 & Matthew 4:1-11
"Desert Times"
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Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

¹¹Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Matthew 4:1-11

⁴Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted 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 Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then 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, 'God will command the 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.'" ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 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 the Holy One.'"

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

"Desert Times"

Lent –

It is such a short word, but for some reason it feels very heavy. For some it still feels relatively new, but for those who grew up Catholic or around a strong Catholic community the word Lent conjures up memories of the Stations of the Cross, self-denial and Tuna "Surprise" casserole.

I am not sure why it feels so heavy, maybe it is the deep purple paraments, but we see these in Advent; maybe it's all the talk of repentance, but here again we hear that same message in Advent; Maybe it's the tone of worship - you'll notice we do not sing any "alleluias" during Lent and the biblical themes we encounter move us along the road to those crowds awaiting an adult Jesus in Jerusalem, not to a tiny infant born in manger.

To be fair, Lent was not intended to be a time for Good Christians to hear all the "bad news" that precedes the "good news" of Easter. It is intended to be a time of grace when the people of Christ reflect on their mortality and sin and the creative and redemptive power of God – a time which inspires disciples to re-dedicate themselves to the way, the truth and the life we find in Christ.

I was always taught that the word "Lent" comes from the same root as "length" and refers to the lengthening days of spring, but many now believe that the word probably derives from "lentare" which means "to bend."

Lent – a time to bend our minds, our wills, our very selves to the way of Christ in the world once again.

Barbara Brown Taylor gives a wonderful description of how Lent came to be (after all, it's not in the Bible). For many years after Jesus ascended into heaven his followers lived as if he was returning tomorrow. But time passed and the cloud that carried him away did not make the return trip as quickly as expected.

In that time, church folks "decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was hard to pick them out from among the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for advocating for the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy."

After too many years had passed the church realized it had wandered down the wrong path on its journey of faithfulness and dug deep into our faith story to help clear the dust from our eyes – the people of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years, Moses sat with God for 40 days and nights and finally Jesus fasted in the desert for 40 days.

So, the Church announced a season of Lent, 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, not counting Sundays. A season of bending ourselves once again to the will of God. A season, as Taylor says, "to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone... to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply ourselves." During Lent the church encouraged people to adopt 40 days of discipline of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. The prayer was for healing souls, fasting was for healing bodies, and almsgiving which was for sharing which heals community

So here we are on the first Sunday of Lent, we find ourselves out in the desert right along with Jesus. Where this story falls in the Gospel of Matthew we have just witnessed the power of Jesus' baptism and from those banks on the Jordan River we are led by the Spirit into the barren desert to fast and pray.

Concerning this passage, noted preacher, Fred Craddock, writes, "...this account directly spoke and speaks to a church whose own faithfulness is forged again and again in the desert." In other words, members of the early church understood what it was to find themselves in the desert and understood the nature of temptation.

**Do you think Rocky River Presbyterian Church knows what it's like to be in the desert?
Do we know what it means to be in the desert and to be tempted?**

My best guess is "yes," we know the desert, we know temptation. Unfortunately, we know all too well what it means to be in dry places; we know what it is to feel parched; we know what it means to experience those deep dark nights of the soul, we know what it means to lose perspective and hope.

And at the same time we know what it means to feel the desire to be comfortable, to go along with the crowd, to blend in and to be "nice" instead of living more fully and passionately into who we have been called to be.

We can't help but know and live in this tension because we are a people who have deep passion for justice and righteousness, but we live in a society, and increasingly in a world, that encourages our self-indulgence; in a world that wants us to focus on ourselves, to treat ourselves, to pamper ourselves, we live in a world that tells us, "we DESERVE the best and should expect nothing less.

This is exactly what the tempter was saying to Jesus in today's passage. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves;" "if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down..." – In other words, "if you are the son of God, why are you out here in the middle of the desert: hot, tired and famished. You, of all people, deserve the best!"

The devil in this text uses his words to tempt Jesus to be less than God calls him to be. But Jesus knew better and Jesus responded with words from the speeches of Moses found in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds God's children that they are called to live as a covenant people; to remember that life comes in knowing who you are and whose you are.

The tempters in our lives urge us to be less than God calls us to be; they urge us to squabble with one another; they urge us to forget the joy we have in loving and serving our God; they urge us to focus on our own needs and desires instead of on the needs and desires of the community of God's people.

In these grace-filled days of Lent, may we bend our minds, our wills, our very selves to the way of Christ in the world. May we remember who we are and whose we are and may we re-dedicate ourselves to the way, the truth and the life we find in Christ, not for ourselves, not for our own purposes, but for all of God's people everywhere.
To God be the Glory.