

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Morning Message:

Will you pray with me? Bring your Word near to us, O God. May it not only come forth from my lips, but may it also reside in our hearts. By the power of your Holy Spirit, O God, help us to respond to your Word with our whole lives, so that we may always follow you, our God-on-the-move. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray.

More so than any other time, Lent is the season in which we are to contemplate our faith and how we are living it out. In order to guide us in our journey through this season this year, the theme I have chosen for our worship experiences is this: “God on the Move.” With things in the world and in our nation seeming to move at a faster pace than most of us are comfortable with, I believe it’s good for us to be reminded that God, too, is always on the move. God is on the move in ways that we can see, but most often in ways that we cannot fully see. In 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul described it this way: “For now, we see in a mirror dimly...” As we immerse ourselves in the Gospel of Luke in this season of Lent, he reminds us that Jesus too was on the move – he didn’t stay in one place for very long. In his earthly ministry, he moved physically from one place to the next, and he moved from one encounter to the next. And he moved through every part of the human experience, encountering everything from temptation to devotion, joy to grief, suffering and even death. As we, again in the holy season of Lent, encounter the life and ministry of Jesus, we cannot stay the same for having had our encounters as individuals and as a community of faith. Because we have answered the call to be disciples of Jesus, we too must be on the move. The season of Lent brings us a chance to especially move inward, as we move through the season of Lent, toward the Cross of Christ. We move deeper into the biblical story of Jesus’s journey on earth, as well as into places within us to see things God wants to show us about ourselves.

Very early in the Gospel of Luke, we find God in Jesus literally on the move – his first big move in this ministry for which God sent him to our world. He has just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. And immediately after, he’s on the move into the desert – the dry, desolate, inhospitable desert. There he fasted for forty days, and there he was tempted by Satan. Satan doesn’t tempt Jesus with things that are not good for him but yet desirable (like we might be tempted to grab one – or two or three – more cookies). Rather, these are tests to see whether even good things can lure Jesus away from a focus on God’s will for his life and ministry. Or, from our perspective, things that could lure Christ-believers into a more comfortable way of following our

Messiah. Yes, Satan's challenges to Jesus are not to do bad things, but to do potentially, it seems, good things. To feed the hungry (starting with himself) by turning stones into bread, to rule the world with "justice," if he would but worship Satan (but how does that work?), and to test God, to test his faith in God, by throwing himself off the side of the cliff. The nature of these temptations remains significant for us in our world today: they are the temptations of filling physical desires, acquiring power, and exercising privilege. All three of these temptations Jesus rejects, preferring instead to trust God's word over and above the promises of Satan. When we are faced with such temptations – filling physical desires, acquiring power, exercising privilege – we are reminded that the one who was tempted in the wilderness strengthens us in our own times of temptations, our own weaknesses. Perhaps most significant among our own temptations is the desire to live on "cruise control," or on "automatic pilot," with everything laid out in front of us. That's privilege. The desire to have everything our hearts want is compelling, and even more compelling is the desire that our loved ones might have everything we want for them. That's the fulfillment of physical desires. And the desire to influence everyone and everything to align so that things go the way we want them to go – that's power. Very, very tempting indeed. And not so far off from the ways in which Jesus was tempted by Satan.

Here is truth. We all go through dark times when our faith feels tested, when our determination to follow Jesus wavers. We face illnesses or financial difficulties; we experience the loss of a loved one – sometimes untimely or even tragically; we find ourselves or someone we love in a damaging relationship, and tough decisions must be made. Often during these times we feel lost, confused, consumed with anger, fear, hopelessness. Yes, we might feel as though God is on the move, and it's movement away from us. We might feel as though God has abandoned us. In these desert times of ours, we find ourselves sorely tempted. For such reasons, on this first Sunday in Lent, we can draw strength not only from Jesus's story of temptation in the desert, but also from Psalm 91, which we heard earlier. "You who live in the shelter of the Most High... Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you..." Historically, Psalm 91 has supplied both Jews and Christians with assurance of refuge in times of trouble of all kinds, including assault from evil forces, deadly plagues, and worldly violence. It imagines the believer surrounded by threats but nevertheless passing through unharmed, defended by angels. Through much of Christian history, this psalm has been lifted up as a source of strength and protection in times of trials. As the psalm promises, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." And so it has become known as the

Soldiers' Psalm. In the U.S., this psalm is among the most frequently invoked passages of Scripture in times of trial and tragedy. It was much-quoted after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Indeed, Psalm 91 describes God as a "refuge," "fortress," and protector. Seen in the context of our Lenten journey that we are just beginning, and in the context of the desert temptations of Jesus, this psalm offers the comfort that God journeys with us both as individuals and together as a larger community of faith. God is with us in times of trouble, but as the events of Holy Week and the Passion of Christ will demonstrate, faith in God does not make us invulnerable or immune to difficulties, dangers, and even tragedies. Psalm 91 does remind us that, whenever we call for God, God is there and God will answer.

On the first Sunday in Lent, there are powerful messages to be found in these passages, and in the questions we would ask ourselves. Where have we experienced God's faithfulness in our deserts, in our wilderness times? How has our relationship with God, with Christ, been transformed by these times? And on the other side of them, how strong are the temptations to return to our very human tendencies to rely on ourselves only? Into the mix of these questions enters Jesus, in whom the ways in which God is on the move are made clear to us. Satan comes to Jesus with tempting offers: to turn a stone into bread, to worship Satan and in so doing, gain influence over the world, and to test God and God's promises in a free-fall experiment. Jesus rejects all of these temptations, choosing instead to trust in God's Word alone. In so doing, Jesus shows us that we are not to test God but rather we are to live by the Word of God; we are to worship God; and we are to serve God. Lent is the time to recognize and respond to God's offer to dwell in our hearts, God's offer to lead us as God is on the move. It's the time to pour our energy into increasing our awareness of, and confidence in, God's presence with us always, no matter the circumstances that might indicate otherwise.

You and I almost certainly won't be tempted to the extremes that Jesus was, but every single one of us moves through our own desert times of loneliness, emptiness, and in them, the temptation to sin. When we inevitably do, we know we can rely on Jesus to walk with us and show us the way. Moving is hard, and our move to Easter and then beyond will bring new challenges – new challenges to you as a faith community, as you prepare to welcome a new pastor, new challenges to Mark and me. In them and through them, let us be assured that we have a Savior who has promised to walk with us every step of the way.