



Faith in the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1-11

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Ash Wednesday is such a weird day in the life of the church. It's such an odd occasion. Especially in American culture; in our society. Generally speaking, in our society, we try to convince ourselves that we are sufficient in and of ourselves. We try to claim we do not need anyone or anything to make us better. Even when we are not good enough, even when we can identify our brokenness, we try to hide and mask it, as if by hiding our brokenness, we can ignore its reality.

Ash Wednesday, in its invitation to name our brokenness, to admit to our mortality, is antithetical to everything our culture proclaims. This day in the life of the church invites us to look deeper within than we usually feel comfortable, to name there are places in our lives that are broken, there are practices in our lives that should be ceased, there are realities that we don't even like to think about. The invitation on Ash Wednesday is one that speaks against the very nature of the world in which we live. A world where we try to push those who represent our brokenness to the margins and shadows of our community so we don't have to see them. As if, by hiding those whose lives illustrate the injustices of our world, we can ignore that such injustices exist. As if we can, by ensuring we don't have to see, or engage with, those whose lives are affected by the detrimental business practices and governmental policies that afford privilege to the few, can ignore this is the reality of our world. And if we can ignore the reality of the world, if we deny such pain exists in other places, surely we can look past our participation in its continuation.

But not on Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday, not only do we come to internally name the brokenness of our lives and that which plagues our society – not only do we come with the intention of bringing such sin to the forefront of our minds – but we are then invited to receive the mark of the ash that makes that reality visible. We are offered this visible sign – square in the center of our forehead – one we cannot hide – that proclaims the inward reality of how broken and weak we are. The mark of the ash is not just a sign, or an opportunity to name there is brokenness in the world, it's the honest proclamation that such brokenness, such hurt, such pain, such want and need, exists in my own life. That in my 2 by 2 square on this earth, there is frailty, and exhaustion, and adultery, and deception, and torment, and tears.

We cannot just keep pushing the reality of our brokenness further into the corner, it's too tiring. It's too exhausting. But is the reason we're here tonight – simply to name our brokenness? Is that why the

church exists? To tell us, once again, how terrible we all are? How sin-filled and far we've wandered from the path of righteousness?

I'm sad to say, I think for many, that's what they see in the church. They see a place where we come to be told, time and time again, just how bad we are at living according to the gospel text. They believe the church is nothing more, and nothing less, than a guilt box, where we come to be convinced that we will never be enough. Where every Sunday is a mini-Ash Wednesday – a time to be reminded of our mortality and our brokenness.

I don't think we need the church to convince us of our brokenness. One simply needs to turn on the nightly news, and they will find countless talking heads who can make that argument with little hesitation. It doesn't matter if you're watching MSNBC or Fox News, they might put a different spin on why we're broken, but no one questions that the brokenness exists. We don't need the church to convince us that we are a sinful people.

We don't come to the church to be convinced of our brokenness, we come to the church to hear that our brokenness is not the end. That our human frailty does not have the final say. That our failures, our temptations, our mistakes, and our existence in an unjust society does not have the final say on who, or whose, we are.

The season of Lent invites us to consider a different story and a different path. Over the coming forty days, as we journey in this season of penitence together, our invitation is not to just acknowledge how broken we are as a people – as a community – as a global body ... but to proclaim that we are redeemable. We are worthy of new life. We are capable of living into a different future. That future begins with Christ.

Our text this evening is the first of many in this season of Lent, in which we are invited to see the stark contrast between the faithfulness of Christ and the unfaithfulness of humanity.

Jesus had been baptized by John, and in his baptism, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, claiming, this is my Son – the Son of God – with whom, I – God – am well pleased. Following this break-out moment of identity, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days. These forty days in the wilderness are linked to the Exodus through Jesus' quoting of scripture, the time when God's people of Israel wandered in between their captivity and slavery in Egypt, and their destination, the promised land of God.

After forty days of fasting, the tempter – or the devil – first tempted Jesus, by saying, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Anytime the

scripture says, “it is written,” it means there’s a connecting story in the Hebrew Bible. Here, Jesus is referencing Exodus 16. In the wilderness, as the people of Israel wandered, they began to gripe for they were hungry. They complained to Moses, “why have you brought us into the wilderness to die of hunger? At least in Egypt, we had our fill of bread.”

They did not believe that God would provide as they had need in their wilderness journey. Though in his temptation, Christ trusted God would provide, the people Israel in the wilderness had to be reminded that “man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Where the people lacked faithfulness, Jesus showed he had steadfast faith.

The devil then again sought to tempt Jesus, in “an extraordinary example of how even Scripture (in the wrong hands) can become the vehicle of a demonic alternative to the path of obedience.”ⁱ The devil takes him to the pinnacle of the temple and invites Jesus to jump and put himself in the path of great harm, saying, “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.” But Jesus, quoting scripture back, says, “it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

This passage that Jesus cites comes from Deuteronomy 6:16, which in its full, reads, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.” This reference goes back to Exodus 17, where again the people Israel were concerned for their thirst. They again asked Moses, “Why have you brought us out here from Egypt to die of thirst?” Moses conveyed their concern to God, who told him to take his staff and strike a rock, and water would flow from the rock. Moses did as he was instructed, and we read in Exodus 17:7, “He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”

Where the people tested God, Jesus had trust in God. “[Jesus] refuses [the temptation], not because of any lack of faith in God’s power and providential care, but because honoring God excludes every kind of manipulation, including putting God to the test.” Where the people failed to trust fully in God, Jesus shows the way of faithfulness.

Finally, the devil tempts Jesus a third time, taking him to a high mountain, and promising him the loyalty of every kingdom across the world, if he would but bow down to the devil. We may miss a bit of the connection to the Greco-Roman world that would not be lost upon the disciples of the first century in this text. In the Greco-Roman world, those who were treated as kings – as Caesars – as lords and gods – built their homes and palaces atop the mountains of their cities. It’s why the Pantheon is at the height of Athens. The devil invites Jesus to take on such a demi-god identity, where he might be able to lord over the kingdoms of the earth. But Jesus responds, “it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

This connects back with the decalogue, given by God through Moses to the people of Israel in the wilderness. The people had sought refuge in the gods of others – they had built idols of worship, from golden calves to structural towers, in hopes of having a god they could mold and control. But the 10 Commandments proclaim there is but one God, and we are not to build idols in the place of God, but to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength. And where the people of Israel failed, Jesus shows his faith is steadfast. When the devil offers a godly role over the kingdoms of earth, Jesus says, “there is a God, there is one God, and we are to serve only him.”

It may be hard at times to connect our brokenness with the temptations of Christ. It may be challenging to see Christ’s faithfulness as a guide through the challenges of our lives. “There is, however, a common denominator that links [our challenges and brokenness] with the temptations ascribed to Jesus. The basic, underlying temptation that Jesus shares with us is the temptation to treat God as less than God. We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread (we are more apt to turn butter into guns), but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God’s readiness to empower us to face our trials. None of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping off a cliff, but we are frequently tempted to question God’s helpfulness when things go awry; we forget the sure promise, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor. 12:9). Pagan idolatry is no more a temptation for us than it was for Jesus, but compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction. It is indeed difficult for us to worship and serve God only. We should be continually grateful that we have a great high priest who, tempted as we are, was able to resist such temptations by laying hold of Scripture and firmly acknowledging that only God is God.”ⁱⁱ

We come on Ash Wednesday not simply to proclaim, and to be marked, as a broken and mortal creation – but to remember that we have something better. We have the body and the blood of Jesus. We can spend all night naming the places of death in the world, but our call as the church is to point to the markings of life. Yes, we are a hurting and broken people, but our suffering and pain does not have the final say. This table invites us to receive new life, healing in our suffering, mercy in our failing, and strength in our weakness. In this season of Lent, you are invited to hear the proclamation that for all the times we might have failed in our faithfulness, there is a witness to faithfulness in the person of Jesus Christ, that makes it possible for us to find life.

We come to the table, the Lord’s table, to receive and to rejoice, that though the ashes mark our mortality, these gifts of bread and vine mark the promise of new life.

ⁱ Anna Case Winters. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.