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Hamilton Mennonite Church

Lent 1 – March 1, 2020

**Show us your Shelter**

Matthew 4:1-11

My sister and I travelled to Italy 15 years ago. We were exploring on our own and we often made use of our trusty phrase book to interrupt someone on their path and ask them for directions. At that time, I was the most willing between us to attempt a conversation in a language neither of us spoke or understood. And French and Spanish were frequently helpful in deciphering bits of Italian.

So we would often repeat this scenario… We approached someone and I would ask in polite Italian, excuse me please where is the “hostel”, for example. This kind soul, having greater faith in my newly acquired Italian accent than was strictly helpful, would go into a detailed explanation of where we were to go and when to turn and what to watch for, all in brisk Italian.

And I, ever optimistic, would nod and take it all in and thank them at the end, and after they left, my sister would ask- So? Where do we go? And I would say, Well, we go as far as that corner, and then we ask the next person.

Each person we were brave enough to interrupt on their path took us another step further, and although I’m sure we were told half a dozen times how to get all the way to each of our destinations, we eventually made it to each place step by step.

The path of following Jesus in life can feel a lot like that too. I mean, we’ve been given directions before, right? Love God, love your neighbour. Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Let your light shine before others. We’ve heard it. We’ve read it. But we also keep reaching a crossroads or turning a corner when we have to ask again – Wait, where do I go next, Jesus? How do I follow you in this situation? Can you repeat those Sermon on the Mount directions? Show me the way.

And I love that about Lent. We don’t practice the season of Lent because we’re all such excellent Christians that we need a chance to show how super devout we are with a few extra spiritual disciplines. When we come back to Lent every year, we are welcome to start over again, to step back and ask some questions, to learn something new, to draw closer to God and return to the way of Jesus. In Lent we turn our faces toward the downward mobility of the cross, this most counter-cultural of realities, and we ask again where this path will take us this time around.

Lent is a traditional time of fasting, and it’s also for those who are already running on empty. It’s for those who have lost their way or aren’t sure exactly where to go next. It’s a time to hold up whatever meager offerings we have – a phrase book and a few new words perhaps – and to ask: “Show us the Way”.

The way of Lent, the way of the cross, begins with Jesus in the wilderness. What kind of wilderness makes you feel the most uncomfortable? Can you picture it? Is it a desert? A jungle? The middle of a teeming ocean? Maybe it’s a city of 24 million people who don’t speak your language? Whichever image makes your stomach churn a little, I think that’s the uncomfortable edge Lent wants to start in.

In the wilderness, we don’t have the things we usually rely on. The landscape is strange. We don’t know what will happen next, what we will need, how we will get it. In the wilderness, we are vulnerable, and in our vulnerability, without our usual resources, we don’t know how we will respond.

Jesus, in his wilderness, was weakened by hunger. He was weakened by isolation. And he was weakened by separation from his vocation. He was vulnerable. And the temptations came. Maybe you read this story and focus on the fact that Jesus overcame temptation, but let’s also pause and notice that Jesus *had* temptations. Jesus had that voice that tried to tell him – you might not be who you say you are. You might not have the support you need. You might need to attach yourself to someone more important than you.

The Jesus we are invited to come to know has been at that place of running on empty, finding no one to turn to, and feeling the tug of easy street instead of the challenge of his calling.

Those are places where we are vulnerable to temptation too. When we have run ourselves into the ground and neglected to feed our souls. When the relationships that once cared for us are lost or weakened or different, whether in truth or our imagining. When we have lost sight of the “why” of how we’re living and a sense of our calling in the world. Temptation does not mean we are weak. It shows us our vulnerabilities, the tender parts of ourselves that we work too hard to hide. Our vulnerabilities are not weakness, they are invitation. Temptation highlights the places where God is inviting us to grow.

Jesus wandered in that wild place where those temptations came to him – temptations of self-sufficiency, security, glory. And the story we’re told is not about how Jesus was strong enough to overcome those temptations. The story tells us that Jesus met the temptations by taking refuge in God, in God’s word, in the strength of God’s promises.

Our Psalm for today sings: “…let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance” (32:6-7).

Jesus turned to the promises from his youth, the scripture he had studied in his young adulthood, the words he heard in the community he prayed with regularly, and he found shelter there from the temptations that might take him off his path. Jesus doesn’t pretend he is invulnerable to temptation. He names his source of strength.

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

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.

“Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance”.

Jesus is not actually empty in the wilderness. He is not actually alone. He is not far from his calling. He is filled with the Spirit of God that descended on him in his baptism just 40 days ago. He has been led, accompanied by that Spirit into the wilderness. And his calling will demand even greater temptation from him than this. Surely the prayer we know repeated itself more than once – Lord, take this cup from me.

Jesus has come to the point of seeing the places within himself that could be tempted away from believing the voice that said “This is my Child, my beloved”, as he came up from the water of baptism.

This voice calls to us too. You are my child, my beloved. And there are rough and wild spots within us that seek to drown out or bury or speed past that voice. The places where we are vulnerable to temptation can be scary to talk about, but they are the places where God is inviting us to grow. When we’re running on empty, or feeling abandoned, or wondering what the point of it all is, God says – ah, I can work with that.

If you take on a spiritual practice this Lent, don’t imagine that you’re doing it to show how strong you are. Take this opportunity to find strength in the shelter of God. Use it to ask yourself the questions: “Whom do I trust for my nourishment? Whom do I trust to love and care for me? And whom do I trust with my service?” <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/trust-saltlectionary-commentary-lent-1-year-a>

What are the vulnerable places that you can identify in yourself? Is it a longing that goes unspoken? A passion that others don’t share or seem to understand? A broken pattern of relating to people that you wish you could mend? Is it a fear, a hurt, a fury? Are you afraid that if you looked straight at it and named it to someone else, it would weaken and break you? What if that is not your place of weakness, but your beginning of growth?

Jesus shows us the way of taking shelter in God’s promises, even in the harshest wilderness. At this stage at the beginning of our growth, we can’t see the whole path ahead of us. But throughout Lent, we will pray, “Show us the Way”. And bit by bit, the way will become clearer, and we will see where Jesus is leading us.

*Remove fabric from cross*

Lent calls us to reflection and repentance. And Jesus in the wilderness also calls us to remember the words spoken at baptism: You are my Child, my beloved. We each have areas in our lives where we feel vulnerable, or uncertain, or perhaps feel we have lost sight of God or what God has called us to do. As music plays, I invite each person as you’re willing to come forward, pick up a stone (or stones) that represent the areas of vulnerability in your life, or the temptations you feel are seeking to take you off track. Take that stone and release it into the water. If it is a cleansing act of repentance you seek, may it be so. If it is a reminder of and recommitment to your baptismal vows, may it be so. If it is a wish to receive living water, may it be so. Anyone, any age, any prayer you carry… all can participate. All can seek the shelter of God. Let’s pray…

Sheltering God,

We seek you today.

There are tender spots within us that are sometimes hard to show

Our wishes, our dreams, our struggles, our stumbles, our temptations

You know what these are, so we hold them before you.

*(Silence)*

Receive these into your living water

Into your cleansing flood

Into the river of baptism

Where you tell us again:

You are my Child, my beloved.

Jesus, show us the way

To the shelter of your love.

Amen