

## “Rejection”

Matthew 4: 1-11

This Sunday begins our journey through Lent. As you may remember, our theme this year is: Resistance and Risk: A journey for healing and wholeness. This theme is based on the understanding that our faith narrative reminds us that more often than not, in any given situation, it is not either/or but both/and. The Creation stories tell us that we are created in the image of God, that we are made up of both ash and starlight. Our faith ancestors show us time and time again that we can completely mess up, be complete failures yet God can and does take our mistakes and bring about good. Even our faith journeys are a funny mix of both/and, usually a mix of resistance and risk.

What I mean by this is that as people of faith, we are called to speak for the voiceless, to be the heart and hands of God in this world. However, we know that there are times we resist this calling, hoping that someone else will come along and pick up that hard work of reconciliation while other times, we know that our resistance, our refusal to accept the wrongs we see in our world, is what makes the Kingdom of God present for so many people.

This idea of both/and when it comes to resistance is filled with risks...both good and bad. Our faith journey is all about finding the balance between these two

“R” Words. This balance between risk and resistance is what brings about healing and wholeness not only for ourselves but for all of creation as well.

As we journey through Lent, taking a look at seven ways we incorporate resistance and risk into our faith, it is my hope that we challenge ourselves to examine our [choices, to examine the consequences of those choices], and to begin a deepening of our relationship with Jesus, so that we will grow in our understanding of what it means to be relationship with both others and the world.

We begin this journey with our first way, our first “R” word: Rejection.

I invite everyone to turn in their pew bibles to Matthew 4: 1-11.

(Read the Text)

It is easy to see why our text is known as the Temptation of Jesus. In the very first line, we are told that Jesus is lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. From the very beginning of this story, we as readers realize just exactly what is at stake in this moment in Jesus’ ministry. Because for the last few chapters, Matthew has been setting the scene, giving us some background about this man named Jesus. We know that he comes from the line of David. We are told that he is to be known as Emmanuel, God with us, and that his name Jesus means he saves his people. We also know that at his baptism, the skies opened up, the Spirit descended like a dove and came to rest upon him, followed by a voice

speaking from heaven, saying, this is My Son, the Beloved in whom I am will pleased. Matthew has told us all these things so that we would know just exactly what is at risk in this moment of temptation. What is at risk is Jesus' very identity as the Son of God. Matthew wants us to know that what happens here will shape Jesus' ministry from this point out in this Gospel.

Thankfully, we know how the story ends, not only this one but also the larger Gospel narrative as well. We know that Jesus says no to the tempter. We know that even when it is the darkest and it seems like all hope is lost, love and light will always find a way. Thankfully we know all this as we begin to read this story we know as the Temptation of Jesus.

But what we don't know....is just exactly who the devil who tempted Jesus really is. Unfortunately we tend to characterize the devil. We picture him as a man wearing a red suit, holding a pitchfork. We picture him with a pointed tail and horns. We assume that he will be easily recognizable when we encounter him in our everyday lives

Except what really happens is that we soon discover the devil comes in many forms. "The devil is absolute power and control. The devil is the one who says that in order to have peace we must have domination. The devil is the one who says we must use violence to stop violence. Hate your enemies to stop hate.

The devil is also the one who whispers “you are not good enough. You are not who you think you are. You can’t make a difference in the world; you can’t even take care of yourself let alone others. The devil is the one who says to us over and over again...Who do you think you are? The devil is the one who says to us Just be quiet. That’s someone else’s problem. Someone else will speak up. Someone else will take care of it. Someone else will see the issue and fix it. The devil is that voice which tells us over and over again...This doesn’t concern you.”

You see, “most of us cannot imagine the devil offering us bread after a forty day fast. We do not know the fear of being held over the ledge at the top of the Empire State Building. We certainly do not know the temptation of being offered all the power of the world.

However, each one of us understand the temptations of the world: pride, vanity, selfishness, and apathy. These are just as dark as Jesus’ temptations and perhaps even more so because most of the time, they do not come with a face.

No, they came to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. They come to us in judgements we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand. They come to rule us, making us able to look away from those in need, able to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger and disease. Temptation comes to us when we allow our temper to

define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power and influence over others define who we are. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless moments of evil that because they are so mundane, they fill our lives and communities.”

That’s why for Jesus, and for us as modern day disciples, this text that we know as the Temptation of Jesus is so much more than simply being about a guy in a red suit holding a pitchfork. It is about our call as the Body of Christ here on Earth to reject the ways of the world, to reject the ways of power and might being what guides our words and actions, to reject the narrative that greed is the foundation of our relationships. It is about our call as Jesus’ disciples to reject the idea that our actions don’t have any consequences or at least none that we should worry about because they do not affect us here in the Western world. They only affect the least of these in some other part of the world, countries that we have ignored, demonized and stripped of their natural resources.

The story we know as the temptation of Jesus is about us rejecting what does not bring us closer to God. At its very core, this story is about who we are and whose we are and how this identity shapes our ministries from here on out. Because if God is our Lord, then the world and its need for power and might is not. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not.

If Jesus is our Savior, then presidents and leaders and parties and coalitions and governments and countries are not.

If Jesus is our Lord, we know that we are called to a different way to be.

We are called to reject the narrative of greed which continues to destroy all of God's creation.

For Jesus, each of these temptations presented to him is an identity piece. They are opportunities for Jesus to show the world that he knows he is by remembering whose he is. By denying each temptation, Jesus rejects the notion to define himself apart from God.

And that continues to hold true for us today as Jesus' disciples. Each and every day, we are given opportunities to show this world that we know who we are, that we know whose we are. We are given opportunities to define ourselves, not by the world's standards but by the standards of God's love and grace. We embrace these opportunities because we know that to be human, is to accept that we are created for relationship, that we are created to be in relationship with our God, that we are created to be in relationship with one another.

We embrace these opportunities to show the world who we are by remembering whose we are because ultimately we know that before we can pick up our cross and follow Jesus, we must reject all that the cross is not. We know that the cross is not a symbol of power, prestige and wealth. Rather it is a symbol

of how this world does not understand what it means to be in relationship with others. It is a symbol that the Kingdom of God runs counter cultural to this world. As followers of Jesus Christ, we know that the cross is a symbol that death and darkness will not have the last word.

So as we begin our journey through Lent, may we continue to embrace the balance between risk and resistance, rejecting everything the cross is not so that all may have healing and wholeness as God's Beloved community. May it be so.

Amen.