

Lent 1

February 26, 2023

Matthew 4:1-11

Pastor Ann Hultquist

+I am like one cast off and forgotten--hasten to help me.

+My heart grows brittle in your absence

+I am like leaves cast aside for burning and dead branches for the fire

+In this stale stillness all joy is fled, Lord, and songs of you are utterly silenced

Chapel:

+O Lord I call out to you, my soul is weary with grief, when will you answer me?

+I am sick and suffering, is there no end to this pain?

It is a psalm of Lament, psalms of Lament, really--beautifully and compassionately created by the Denver area liturgical artist Ken Phillips. Pastor Caitlin's networking brought them (and the artist) to Augustana for our Lenten season.

Lament psalms are cries to God from the depth of our being, and these banners are no exception. I encourage you to take time after worship each Sunday to look more closely at their artistry and read the words he has crafted. {Here in the Chapel, the lower part of each banner is our cry, our pleading with God; and the upper part expresses God's constant promise and presence.}

In the sanctuary, twelve banners express one Psalm of Lament, beginning at the pulpit and traveling counter-clockwise around the worship space.

All of the banners are beautiful in varying ways--but their words starkly remind us of the brokenness we all feel at times and places in our lives; of the suffering that many of us have experienced and seen too much of in our world. No matter where we find ourselves on this day, these words of lament are familiar ones--the questions that people of faith have grappled with for thousands of years.

There is some of that wrestling going on in the Gospel on this first Sunday of Lent. In a few verses previous to this morning's reading, Matthew writes about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John. That passage concludes: "And a voice from

heaven said ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.’” Talk about affirmation, identity and love--wrapped up in one brief moment. And the very next verse says “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.”...No celebrating, no holding on to the moment--just a walk into the wilderness, Jesus’ hair still dripping wet.

Wandering, fasting, hungry, alone--do you wonder what happened in those days and nights? Do you wonder if Jesus prayed or sang the psalms he knew so well--psalms full of questioning, pleading and lament? “Oh Lord, I call out to you...”

The movement in Jesus’ life from that one verse to the next--from joy to struggle--is a familiar one, isn’t it? The daily, weekly messiness and complexity of life moves in us and outside us in unpredictable ways. One moment all is well and we feel we’ve got a real handle on that moment or even on the future--and then, something we didn’t see coming plummets us to a place of grief, questioning, disappointment, or despair. “Well, that’s life!” a cynical person might say--but the life and ministry of Jesus, including the Gospel passage today, rebuts that kind of off-handed sarcasm.

After days and nights of heat and cold and being alone, then the tempter’s voice began to challenge: “Who do you think you are?...**If** you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread...**If** you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; are you doubting that God will catch you...**If** you are the Son of God, don’t you think you should have it, don’t you want all the power?”

That one little word: **if**. **If**. Who are you, Jesus? Are you sure you are “beloved”? The wilderness must have seemed endless as the harangue continued. There wasn’t a script for him to follow--so Jesus wrestled in the heat and the dark, hungry and tired, wrestled with the temptation to not trust God’s love and goodness; to be someone else than who he was called to be.

Have you heard a similar voice in your own times of lament? One that tells you “You know there’s no hope, right? You better just look out for yourself. Are you sure *you* are *really* loved by Jesus?”

We start to wonder; we start to turn in on ourselves and away from other people; away from caring for others; away from God. We've seen it, lived it--we know what can happen there--grasping for control or power; hatred and indifference; hearts that are hardened; and so much fear.

But in this passage of Matthew Jesus models a different response: to be grounded in the promises of God; to trust God's love, even when we can't feel it; to rely on the hope and faith of others around us and those who have come before us. Did you hear how Jesus spoke the promises of Hebrew scripture? How Jesus leaned on and into their assurances? It isn't optimism, or inner strength--it's confidently falling into the grace of God.

After those 40 days and nights were over, Jesus left that wilderness to begin a ministry where he would enter again and again into those places we know so well: places of sorrow, desperation, pain and doubt; knowing inside and out their agonies; making holy all of life.

The Beloved Son claims that identity by *loving* humanity--*loving us*--without limit, even while condemned and dying on the cross. How we struggle to trust the promise that that love embraces us without prerequisites...in every moment.

So we are called back to the healing waters of our baptism, to the cross traced on our forehead: Child of God, Beloved--you are mine forever. We can fall into God's grace, trusting that we will Rise and Sing again.