

Remembering Whose We Are

Matthew 4:1-11

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
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I.

The seasons are changing, both outside and inside the church.
Outside the church, trees are blossoming in shades of white and pink.
Yellow daffodils are popping up in people's lawns and on the sides of the road.
Bright greens are emerging on the tips of evergreen branches.
The colors are changing inside the church too.
On Ash Wednesday, a black cross of ash was placed on foreheads and words were spoken: "Child of God, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."
Inside the church, the greens of Epiphany have given way to the purples of Lent.
Lent is a season to reflect and pray, to ask forgiveness and share compassion.
I learned recently that the word "Lent" comes from an old word meaning "lengthen," as in the lengthening of days in the north at this time of year.
You may know that Lent is a season of 40 days, plus Sundays.
It is a time to prepare for the most important week in the life of the Christian Church, so important we call it *Holy Week*.
It begins on Palm Sunday with the story of Jesus' parade into Jerusalem.
It continues with Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday, and Holy Wednesday.
Then comes Maundy Thursday and the story of the Last Supper.
On Good Friday we tell the story of Jesus' betrayal and trial and death on a cross.
After that, a day of holding vigil, of waiting, a day known as Holy Saturday.
And then, in a flash of sunrise, Lent ends, but that's a story for another day.

II.

During Lent this year at Community Church, we will concentrate each Sunday on a different spiritual practice, or discipline, to root us in our tradition.
We do this so that when the storms rage, we'll have deep, strong roots to keep us from getting blown over.
Today our discipline is the practice of memory, that is, the practice of remembering who we are as children of God in the midst of voices trying to tell us otherwise.
Remembering who we are is a challenge because the messages of friends and family and TV shows and celebrities and advertisements and politicians and people we admire and people we don't, can be so convincing.

Humans have a desire to be liked or respected or honored or heard or seen.
Our eyes and ears are open to messages telling us who we are or who we should be.

When my kids were quite little, I learned why young children love superheroes, princesses, and sports stars.

You see, a 5-year-old doesn't have a lot of real power in the world.

She can't beat anybody at arm wrestling – maybe a baby, but that doesn't count.

He can't drive a car, except maybe a little plastic one on the sidewalk.

She gets frustrated when people don't listen to her because, frankly, it's frustrating when you're trying to say something and people don't listen to you.

He always has to sit at the kids' table, or get the smaller dessert, or go to bed earlier than everyone else, and it's not fair.

It is only natural that the heroes of young children become those characters, real or imagined, who have an extraordinary power.

Iron man has a suit that makes him incredibly strong, not to mention making it so he can fly and shoot things and even blow things up.

Belle has her beauty which can make people fall in love with her, even a scary beast who would do anything to protect her.

Stephen Curry doesn't make every shot, but he makes so many of them, often in ways that dazzle, and his name is on billboards and t-shirts and on the lips of anyone who knows anything about basketball.

These are our heroes because they help us imagine what it would be like to be powerful, beautiful, talented, and loved by everyone.

Many people, as they grow up, are told that they are powerful, beautiful, talented, and loved by everyone, and to some extent that might be true, but not always.

Remembering who you are as a child of God means remembering that you are loved even when you are not powerful, beautiful, talented, and loved by everyone, which is, quite frankly, most of the time.

When we forget who we are, we forget that we are marked at baptism as God's beloved and that no one and nothing can ever take that away.

III.

Today we heard a story about Jesus being tempted to forget who he was.

The last three weeks, we've been jumping around a lot in the Gospel of Matthew.

Two weeks ago, we were in chapter 6 hearing parts of the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week, we were on a different mountain in chapter 17, the mount of Transfiguration.

Today, back in chapter 4, immediately following his baptism, Jesus goes by himself into the desert where he fasts, that is, he eats no food, for 40 days and 40 nights.

Because it's Matthew's story, and because Matthew's community was mostly Jewish, when we hear the number 40, we should remember other important 40's in the Hebrew Bible, like 40 days of rain in the story of Noah, the 40 days and nights that Moses spent on Mount Sinai, and 40 years that Israel spent in the wilderness being provided for by God. Now Jesus is in the wilderness, in the desert, fasting, trusting that God will provide.

But someone is there who sees an opening, someone who notices an opportunity to distract Jesus from his ministry, to disrupt his life work.

You could call him a nemesis.

He is known by several names and he shows up in different forms, not just to Jesus but to all of us at some time or another.

In Genesis 1, he takes the form of a serpent to Adam and Eve.

In the Book of Job, he's called "the accuser."

Here in the Gospel of Matthew, he is called the tempter, or the tester, or Diablo.

I like to imagine him as a sort of character in a superhero comic.

In Greek, that word "Dia ballo" means to throw across, or to throw off.

Diablo's superpower is to throw things in his enemy's path that cause them to be distracted, to forget who they are, and to give up on their purpose.

In the desert, Diablo sees how famished Jesus is and he decides to make a move.

"Hey Jesus," he says, "people are saying you're the Son of God. Pretty impressive. If that's true, I'll bet you could snap your fingers and these round stones here would turn into loaves of fresh bread."

Diablo is good at what he does because there is always a little bit of truth in what he says.

God *did* provide bread for the people Israel when they were in the desert.

Wouldn't God do the same for Jesus if he asked for it?

Instead, Jesus remembered a little piece of scripture, a few words that gave comfort to Jews when they didn't have enough to eat: "People don't just live by eating food. Life is given meaning by listening to every word that comes from God's mouth."

Well, Diablo was very impressed. "He looks so hungry," Diablo thought, "I figured I could get him to forget about God and make himself a sandwich."

But Diablo wasn't done yet. He scooped Jesus up and flew him all the way to Jerusalem, to the holy city, to very tippy-top of the holy temple.

Teetering there, Diablo said, "Since you're the Son of God, I'll bet that if you jumped off this temple, some of God's angels would come and catch you."

And then Diablo quoted some more scripture - he knows the Bible pretty well - "God will protect you, won't even let you stub your toe."

Again, there was some truth in Diablo's words.

Certainly God wants to protect us and take care of us.

But Jesus saw what Diablo was trying to do, so he quoted some powerful scripture right back at him: "God is not a pet. You shall not make him perform tricks for you."

"Wow," Diablo said to himself. "This guy's good. I'm bringing my best stuff and he's done well so far. Looks like I'm gonna have to bring out the big guns. It's time for the test that no one has ever passed."

And so Diablo swept Jesus away again, this time to the top of a very high mountain where he could show Jesus the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor.

And then Diablo made his big move.

He said, "All of this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Boom. Diablo must have thought he had won. He had offered Jesus the entire world, every kingdom, every city, every army, every political office, every professional sports team, every item in every store you could imagine.

Diablo had thrown across Jesus' path every power imaginable, and because Jesus didn't seem to have any extraordinary superpower, how could he resist?

But Diablo never got to dance his victory dance.

Jesus had a power that Diablo did not expect.

He had the power to remember who he was, no, even more powerful than that, Jesus had the power to remember *whose* he was.

Which is why he was able to say, "Get lost, Diablo, for I remember that it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, the one true God, the only one we serve."

At that, Diablo slinked away and Jesus found himself alone in the desert again.

IV.

One line the prayer Jesus' taught his disciples is "Lead us not into temptation."

Why would we need to pray that?

I mean, why would God ever lead us into temptation?

According to Matthew, God's Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to be tested.

Maybe the reason we pray "lead us not," is because we know we wouldn't do so well.

We are not superheroes and we are always at risk of forgetting who we are.

But Jesus does not leave us to fend for ourselves.

He leaves us with *tools* that help us remember who we are in the face of all voices trying to convince us otherwise.

He leaves us with his *words*, including those found in the Sermon on the Mount.

He leaves us with his *ministry* of healing and freeing and proclaiming the nearness of God's realm.

He leaves us with *instructions* to teach and preach and pray and baptize. He shows us how, then says "go and do the same."

He leaves us with a *community*, the church, far from perfect and varied in its forms, but a dynamic gathering of people called to follow in Jesus' way.

He leaves us with his *Spirit*, the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Jesus guiding and abiding within the world even though we can't see or hold him in bodily form.

And he leaves us with the most powerful tool of memory ever known on the face of the earth.

Diablo, and others like him, won't come anywhere near it, don't want to have anything to do with it. Do you know what it is?

This table. This bread. This cup. This community and communities like it all over the world gathering "in remembrance of me."

It doesn't look like much, doesn't look very powerful, but - don't tell Diablo this - that's where it's power comes from.

A little bit of bread, the word of God on your lips and teeth and tongue.

A little taste of wine, a reminder of God's life poured out for all the world.

A little gathering of people, nobody special, but people whose lives are taken and blessed, broken and given to a world that is prone to forgetting.

I don't know that it would make for a great comic book story, but it's our story, the story that reminds us who we are, no, that causes us to remember whose we are.

Amen.