

“Living for the Long Game”
Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler
March 5, 2017
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Matthew 4:1-11

The scene I see play out between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness is one of choosing between instant pleasures or eternal fulfillment, rapid approval or radical discipleship, proof of God’s protection or a questionable certainty. I like to think that each choice Jesus makes in the wilderness as a move toward the long game.

If you have the patience to play the long game, chances are more likely you will have a favorable outcome. The Greek writer Aesop tells the fable of the tortoise and the hare; the rabbit, boastful and proud, questions why the turtle even bothers; “you will never win the race!” In fact, the rabbit is so sure of its athletic prowess that it stops along the way to take a nap, thinking with the turtle’s pace “I have all the time in the world!” Meanwhile, the turtle plods along, muttering to himself “slow and steady wins the race.” He does not take a break. Sure enough, right when the rabbit began to yawn and stretch and run again, the turtle was crossing the finish line.

Chris and I had a significant breakthrough as new parents when we decided, 6 months in we would play the long game. With the pediatrician’s encouragement, we would finally let our baby daughter cry it out at night. That piercing cry had become the service bell at the all-you-can-eat buffet of maternal attention throughout the night, and we could never get more than an hour of sleep. It was brutal after we made the choice to let her cry for hours on end. However, 3 days later, she was consistently sleeping peacefully through the night, getting the rest she deeply needed. More importantly, her parents’ marriage survived.

To train for the spiritual long game, we follow Jesus to the wilderness. Lots can happen in the wilderness. It is a liminal time and space, a threshold between what once was and what could possibly be. In wilderness time you are exposed. It is why some people may choose to take on a fast of some sort during Lent, to expose the ways they fill themselves with substitutes for God. I like the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

“It is necessary, to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I am convinced that 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone.”

In the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus with bread. Jesus ended up flipping the devil’s intent. The devil wanted to break Jesus’ fast, appealing to his most basic human physical urge: to be fed. But rather than relying on his own power to turn a stone to bread, Jesus shared in the human experience of hunger. And instead of giving in to his hunger, Jesus played the long game and later turned one of the most basic of human physical needs--bread-- and infused it with blessing, making it holy for us in the communion meal. If Jesus can do that with the bread we eat, could he possibly also do that with our lives?

In the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus with authority. It was the kind of authority expected of the messiah. As a Jew, Jesus knew the prophecy that an anointed one would lead God’s people as a great military and political leader, securing the peace of Israel for once and for all. Jeremiah 23 prophesies, “I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as a king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness throughout the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety” (vv 5-6).

In the wilderness, Jesus had to struggle with whether he would become what the people expected the Messiah to be-- a king over the nations of the

world-- or follow the long game of what God might call him to be. Jesus found it possible that God could enter into him at his weakest. If the Messiah can come in the form of one who will die on the cross rather than a mighty king, is it possible that God might take up residence in my life? In yours?

In the temptor's third challenge to Jesus, he speaks none other than the holy scripture as slick words to tempt Jesus. Psalm 91, from which the devil quotes, promises God's protection to those whom God trusts. Hear these words again:

"Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation" (Psalm 91 vv14-16).

The ESL Bible Study is reading the book of Job right now. Job grapples with the question: if I love God, act justly, treat my neighbor with kindness-- would not God then reward me with well-being in this life and the next? And yet, too many people who are *deserving* of all good rewards become bearers of the worst kinds of news: an inoperable cancer; a teenager who experiences rape; a father who gets detained in an immigration sweep right after he drops his boy off at school. When these things happen, it shakes something loose in the formula we have been promised: either God is not all powerful; God is not all loving; or God is not good.

So when the devil tempts Jesus to throw himself down from the highest point of the temple, he is asking Jesus to bank on the formulaic theology: good person + loves God = assured protection. Jesus decides not to put conditions on God's actions. He knows the story of Job, who experienced deep suffering despite having an apparently faultless relationship with God and neighbor. Perhaps also he knew "deserving" can be a slippery slope. We can be so quick to call God into question when we face suffering in our lives or in the lives of those we love dearly. But who is to say that the folks

standing in line waiting for work in labor pools aren't deserving? Who is to say that the 50,000 children on the brink of death in drought-parched Somalia over the weekend are not *deserving* of life and the right to care for their families?

Before Jesus could claim the authority to speak to people who suffer from loss and suffer from poverty and also suffer from being oppressors, he needed time in the wilderness to grapple with God's role in human suffering. In the wilderness, Jesus prepared for his own suffering and death on the cross. It is there that God meets us and knows our deepest loss, our deepest pain, our deepest suffering.

In the wilderness we grapple with the reality that no matter how well we play the long game, we all will one day die. There is no getting around it. Hopefully it will be after a life lived long and well. But even when it is not, we can know this one supreme comfort: In life and in death, we belong to God. We do not belong to our temptations. We do not belong to our jobs. We do not belong to our grief. We do not belong to those who would do us harm. We belong to God. And God will never abandon us--even in--especially in-- our deepest suffering, God's presence and love is unshakeable.

When you play the long game, your prize is not at the end. It comes in the journey. There, even in the wilderness, you find out: you belong to God's love. God will feed you. You will discover in that close relationship who God calls, or more politely invites, you to be. God will hold you, even to your death, for there is no place you can go where God has not been before. Thank you Jesus, for what you can show us in the wilderness. Be with us in these days of Lent, so we do not have to face the Temptor by ourselves. Coach us in the long game. Amen.