

Lent 1 Year A

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Some of us heard those words this past week as we celebrated Ash Wednesday – the beginning of Lent. I mentioned then that one commentator found those words and this season calling us to reflect on *what we are made of* and *what we will become*.ⁱ

So when I listened to a sermon on today’s Gospel by Ryan Ahlgrim, pastor of First Mennonite Church in Richmond, Virginia,ⁱⁱ I found the connection between those words from Ash Wednesday and this description of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness that I had never before seen.

To start with, we need to look at where this text is in relation to the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the preceding chapter. In fact, the verse immediately preceding today’s passage is this: And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And then we are told, today, that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.

Ahlgrim says that we need to let go of our literal lenses for a moment – stop seeing Jesus and some horned image of the devil dressed in red standing on the edge of a cliff.

Ahlgrim invites us to lay aside the vivid symbolic imagery of which Matthew the evangelist is so fond, to look at this from another perspective. Jesus has just experienced, in his baptism, that he is God’s Beloved. And now he heads into the desert, the wilderness, for a long retreat – to pray about what this means. He goes apart – for forty days – to reflect on *what he is made of, and who he will become*, if you will. He goes into the wilderness to reflect on how he will be the Beloved Son of God. And so these three temptations described by Matthew and the other evangelists are really temptations to Jesus to be something *other* than the Beloved Son of God.

Ahlgim sees the voice of those temptations coming – not from outside, some evil entity – but perhaps from Jesus' own thoughts. A voice says, "Since you are the Son of God, you could turn these stones into bread and feed not only yourself but all the world. You could end human hunger and suffering! That would be a wonderful way to be the Messiah! – and besides that, everyone will follow you for what you can give them." But Jesus says, "We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." There is more to life than survival. We live for relationship to God." Jesus *does* feed the hungry and cure the sick, but he is always pointing to something more – the more of recognizing *what we are made of and to whom we shall return*.

And then, imagining himself at the top of the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus hears the voice say, "Throw yourself down from the top – and the angels will come to catch you. And everyone will be in awe of you. God will prove to you and to them that you really *are* God's son. And they will all follow you in awe!" And Jesus says, No. I will not *play games* with my relationship to God. One does not put God to a test. That is not how this relationship works.

Finally, Jesus perhaps imagines standing on a high mountain. And the voice says, if you ruled all these kingdoms, think of the good you could accomplish! If you were in power over it all, think what you could do! And it could happen! If you just use the tools of the devil, you could make it happen. Just rile the people enough and they will revolt. You could pit them against the Romans, made them hate enough to kill; you could assassinate Caesar – and then *you* could assume the throne and rule. You would be reclaiming the throne of David! What a good thing that would be! And everyone would obey you, because you would have the power. You would be in control. And Jesus says, "There is only one who is to be served, under whose reign and in whose kingdom we should live, and that is God."

These temptations of Jesus give us a vibrant example of what it is to wrestle with *what we are and what we will become*. In his baptism – and in ours – God has spoken the answer: You are my Beloved. Jesus knew enough about God to know that God was not in the magic of bread made from stone, that the relationship God desires with us is not that of supplier of our every desire. Rather, we live in and on the word of God: *You are my beloved*.

Jesus knew that God, while shrouded in mystery, is not interested in our awe at astonishing feats. Our relationship with God has to go beyond a belief that only remains if the angels *do* come and keep us from dashing our feet against the stones – because both we and Jesus have experienced the reality that the angels sometimes don't show up until much, much later. In our passage today, the angels only come after Jesus has finished wrestling with the temptations, after he has come to some resolution about what it meant to be the Son of God. Jesus knew that, as the Beloved Son of God, he was called to bring the good news of the presence of God's kingdom here with us now – and that this kingdom, this rule, was not established by power and domination, by hatred or greed, but by love.

When Jesus leaves the wilderness, he begins his ministry – his vocation. He begins to live out what he realized in the wilderness – what he was made of, and what he would come to be. Where he came from, and to whom he would return. Matthew says that when he left the wilderness, he began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” Change your perspective, and change your lives, because God is here with you.”

In Luke's account, Jesus soon goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus, proclaimed by God as God's beloved, went to the wilderness for 40 days and wrestled with what that meant, wrestled with how he was to live out who he was, who he was to be. And the evangelists tell us of three temptations, all of which were temptations to good things, perhaps – ways to get the people to fall in line behind him. But he rejected each of them – because they were not *God's* way.

What this has to do with us is this: We, too, are beloved by God. And we, too, are called – to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim God’s favor. The ashes traced in a cross on our forehead to begin Lent cover the same spot as the cross traced there at our baptism, when we – or someone in our name – promised to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among *all* people.

And so every year, we come to this wilderness we call lent – to wrestle with what that means, to wrestle with what it means for us to be the Beloved of God, to ask ourselves what we are made of, and what we shall become.

The temptations are there for us, too – as individuals and as church. Is it enough for us to turn stones into bread – to fill baskets at Christmas and Easter, to take communion to the sick, to – if we do not also build relationships with those we feed, relationships that acknowledge those others as part of this body of Christ? Is it enough to celebrate God’s transcendence with high majesty if we will not see the mystery of God in the ordinary? Do we misuse authority as a means to power rather than as the great commission to serve?

In these 40 days, let us remember what we are made of and what we will become; remember whose we are, and to whom we shall return. Let us wrestle with what it means to be the Beloved of God, wrestle with how we are to live that out. And let us resist the temptation to be less than we are.

Amen.

- [Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](#) [Romans 5:12-19](#) [Matthew 4:1-11](#) [Psalm 32](#)

ⁱ Quivik, Melinda. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4397

ⁱⁱ Ahlgrim, Ryan. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/>