

Sermon

March 5, 2017 | The First Sunday in Lent
Text: Matthew 4:1-11 | Preacher: Lydia Gajdel

I love Lent. It is, in fact, my favorite liturgical season. But this year something feels different. A little less inviting. A little more ominous. The prospect of spending 40 days reflecting on sin and human brokenness feels overwhelming to me. I have been overstimulated into a deep anxiety about our world, an anxiety that has morphed into a sense of paralysis in the face of the evils that enslave us. Racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia... I could go on and on... These things have consumed our public life together, polluting our discourse and tricking us into believing our hatred of those around us is biblically sanctioned because, coincidentally, God seems to hate all the same people we do. The way that we engage the idea of each other on the macro, societal levels has impacted the way we are able to be in relationship with one another. The sins held deep within us are now publically acceptable to throw out into the world in the form of upturned tombstones, racially motivated violence, and detentions at the border. And none of this even begins to touch on the underlying anxieties that are always at play for each of us as individuals. Family dynamics in the face of illness or other turmoil. The pressures to be the most productive worker you can be to bring in the most money possible. The stress of a life packed to the brim with activities when all you want to do is sit down for a minute. And breathe. And refocus.

And it is in that refocusing that I remember why I love Lent. Lent is a time set apart by the church in preparation for Easter to highlight what it means to be human. There is a gap between the people we are and the people we are called by God to be. We are created in the image and likeness of an all knowing, all loving God and yet we stumble. We miss the mark. We make decisions, both conscious and unconscious, that slowly but surely widen the distance between who we are and our nature that is formed in the image of a loving God. We are human. And to be human is to come face to face with the gap between our reality and our God-given potential for relationship, for mercy, and for justice. But what better time than now to recognize the humanity of each and every one of us, when our humanity, laced with depravity, is so blatantly visible in the world, both corporate and individual? Because it is not simply a case of those people over there being sinful and running our world amuck. It's not about politicians or

businessmen or those lazy millennials. It's about us, you and me, and our relationships with God and with each other.

This human duality, a dichotomy set up between who we are and who God calls us to be, creates a world of choices, of temptation. Every day we are faced with opportunities to grow closer to God and tempted by things that separate us from who God calls us to be.

This is where we find Jesus in our gospel today, face to face with the temptations that come with being human. This section comes at the beginning of Jesus's ministry in Matthew. Right before this Jesus is baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist then is led by the Spirit out into the desert for forty days of fasting followed by a visit from the Devil. When the Devil is done with Him, Jesus goes out to preach and call his first disciples. The temptation of Jesus is set up as an integral part of beginning his ministry. He cannot preach the message of God, heal the sick, feed the hungry, or live into his existence as the son of God incarnate until he has come face to face with what it means to be human. Until he has come face to face with the devil who tempts him to widen the gap between himself and God, to prove a point about his individual power and strength for the sake of riches.

This is a Jesus I don't think we have to search very hard to see ourselves in. I mean, think about the week you just had. You might not have met the devil incarnate, but I'm sure that you were given the opportunity to put yourself before your neighbor, to stay silent in the face of injustice, to widen the gap between your actions and who you are called to be.

Recently my fiancé Laurie and I were at a roller derby game out in the suburbs. Roller derby is an iconic sport where women on roller skates strategically shove each other around a circular rink in an effort to score points. Everyone was having fun trying to understand this absurdly mesmerizing sport when Laurie went to get a beer. The woman at the concession stand checked her ID and went to pour her drink when a police officer walked over, took the Illinois driver's license, held it over her head and said, "Sir, you're a little too young." Laurie is androgynous and queer,

meaning that even at the age of 30 she is used to being seen as young and male. But as she tried to reason with the officer, he became more elevated and threatened to confiscate the ID and eject her from the game because he believed her to be a teenage boy using a fake ID. In the end the situation was de-escalated by the two women working the stand preaching the word of queer theory and gender equality and kindly, yet firmly, plucking her ID out of the cop's hand.

This story is not meant to illustrate a hero and a villain, but rather to show that each of us could easily be any one of those people. We are tempted by fear and confusion to stand firm at the risk of appearing weak in our ignorance. We are tempted by self-preservation to remain silent in the face of injustice. We are tempted by hatred to be overcome with anger and malice instead of recognizing the humanity of each individual. Temptation is part of the human story.

Reflection on that human story and God's intimate role within it is why we have Lent. Lent is a time set apart by the church calendar, marked off for recognition of our humanity and attention to the ways that we are so deeply in need of our God. We have neglected God's call for us on an individual and societal level. Things are not as they should be. But they will be. We are assured that the kingdom is not yet, but coming. But in order to recognize the salvation that comes with the Kingdom of God we must first recognize that we need God in the first place. Recognize that we are called to greater things that we can do alone. And that is what we set this time aside to do. Lent is about a particular kind of attention. Attention to the ways that we have been tempted and failed, missed the mark, not responded to God's call for us. It is also about paying attention to the intersection between our humanity and the God in whose image we were created.

In closing, I want to invite everyone into our Lenten prayer practice here at SPR as a way of paying attention and reflecting on our humanity and God's love for us through it all. The empty font sits in the middle of the sanctuary during this season as a reminder of our baptismal covenant, the promises that either we made or were made on our behalf to serve God and renounce evil. During Lent, we will fill the font with the prayers of this community in recognition of our human frailty and our need for God in everything that we do. When you came in today there was a piece of paper on every chair. I invite you to write your prayer

on it and either during the peace, as you walk past the font in line for communion, or after the service come forward and place it in the font. These prayers are yours and will not be read aloud or shared. Don't feel like they need to be written any certain way. God accepts our prayers in any form, even pictures. All prayers that are written and those that we carry with us throughout Lent will join together as the prayers of this community. At the end of Lent these prayers will be scattered at the foot of the cross on Good Friday in recognition of the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf.

Lent is a time to breathe, refocus, and contemplate the ways that we are separated from God's call for us, recognizing our dependence on God's love. Let us enter into that contemplative state together in prayer, coming before our God who has claimed us as broken, beloved creatures. Amen.