

Just as I am
Matthew 4:1-11
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo
March 1, 2020

Lent 1: Show us our vulnerabilities and strengthen us.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted^[a] by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'^[b]"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

*"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'^[c]"*

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'^[d]"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'^[e]"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

As I have said in previous sermons, I love angry Jesus. As an Enneagram 8 (and if you're wondering about the Enneagram, just wait, because we have a Sunday School series starting up this week about it), I see so much of myself in angry Jesus. Most of this stems from my "Am I the only one seeing this?" attitude when something is clearly wrong, as 8s on the Enneagram have a strong sense of justice and injustice, fairness and bias.

Jesus is patient. Jesus is completely reasonable. After 40 days of not eating, surely the hunger has left him and all that's left is a bundle of nerves and pure adrenaline. Satan

dangles enticing offers in front of him that are objectively quite cruel, but, as the passage heading says, quite tempting. Surely this is much worse than smelling food at 5 pm when you forgot to grab lunch. This is the point where you're this close to breaking mentally. One time, Jesus quotes scripture. Another time, Jesus puts out a warning. He says, "Again, it is said..." By the third time, Jesus has an exclamation point added to his statement. "Get away from me, Satan!" Jesus did not silently pray for Satan to leave. Jesus did not ignore Satan and continue to sojourn through the desert. Jesus yells at Satan, with all the power of the exclamation point. This breaking point causes Satan to leave, and angels are left to attend to Jesus.

Where this falls in the account of Jesus' life is interesting. Jesus is baptized, which we know is a key moment for his ministry, and right away, by Matthew's account, he is thrown into the desert. There's no orientation period, no discussion of what it means to have the spirit descend on you. Jesus is thrown right into the thick of an extreme situation.

We talk a lot about "spiritual deserts," and places where we've felt like we haven't had our needs met. What I hope we can imagine is this image of fasting and desperation that Jesus has entered. He is alone, and he has nothing.

It's easy to put Jesus on a pedestal. But to do so may start to deny some of his humanity, or even part of his identity. It's easy to say, "Look, he avoided an easy out!" That would make things too simple. Jesus' identity is what's at the center here. Satan asks, "IF you are the Son of God..." "Jesus knows he is the Son of God. Jesus also knows that both he and God are being mocked. Jesus is adamant in letting Satan know his identity is not made known by miracles that benefit his needs at the moment. His identity lies in that baptism moment that happened just a few verses back, the moment the Spirit descended and jump started his ministry to the world.

Simplistic thinking and self-importance are at stake. Satan is asking that Jesus give in to his physical desires with his bread comment. Satan is asking that Jesus fall into a simplistic thinking of scripture, making it a litmus test for faith. Jump off the ledge, you'll be caught. Don't you have enough faith? Satan takes it even farther by offering all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. It's a very brief sentence and description for such a large offer. This means power. This means fame. This means avoiding the inevitable; the journey to the cross. Jesus can avoid pain, suffering, mocking, scorn, and have everything that every 8 on the Enneagram wants...just a little recognition. Just a little power. Just a little control. But again, Jesus' very identity and mission are at stake. Jesus will not simply grab influence by way of human beings who find themselves unsatisfied unless they have status admired by other humans. That's not a route that a Messiah takes.

Commentator Melinda Quivik makes the point of Jesus persistently asking "why" instead of settling for an easy answer. Jesus has an answer for Satan at every turn. And it's not an "Oh, ok." It's a real response. Jesus is not fooled by simplistic answers and continues to live into the complexity of what it means to withstand temptation.

So Jesus, as our example and guide, shows us a Christ-like example of response in the face of temptation. As we do the obvious and look to where this applies in our own life, it begs the question, what are our temptations? Where do we look for easy answers and simple solutions? Do we long for human recognition? To be noticed? To be valued? Do we long to show off how special and chosen we are as God's people? As I've said in a previous sermon, show off how we've been "blessed?" I don't think any of these things are inherently bad, I think the problem can come from when we look for them in the wrong place, expect them from others, or do so in such a way that destroys our identity and what we stand for as people of God.

A long time ago, I gave a person I really loved and admired as a good friend a Kindle. This is when Kindles were new and fancy. I'm a terrible gift giver, and I was convinced this person wouldn't know how much I appreciated them unless I got them the perfect gift. I thought that gift was a Kindle. Unfortunately, I'm not good at discerning what might be a good gift and what might not be a good gift. I got them a Kindle because they liked to read and travelled a lot. While most of us when we receive a gift we don't like or don't have any use for say "thank you, that was thoughtful" (or something like that) and move on, this person was brutally honest and said that they had no need for this technology. I was really hurt.

I was upset about this for quite some time and soon the Kindle became a metaphor for putting all my eggs in one aspect of a relationship basket, if you will. It also comes up as a metaphor for when things are too one-sided or only life-giving for one party. When I get concerned about someone not thinking I'm enough....am I giving them the Kindle? When I don't get the response I was expecting and feel dismayed at my lack of recognition....did I give them the Kindle?

Satan doesn't get the Kindle. Satan doesn't get any more power than Satan already has. The problem doesn't lie when we give into temptation and go after the stuff we want, we are human. I'm not saying that it's good when we do that, I'm not saying that we don't sin when that happens, I'm saying that it's inevitable as we are not perfect beings. The problem lies with giving Satan the power that Satan doesn't deserve or need. The problem lies when we let Satan dictate our actions and exploit our vulnerabilities. I don't mean "vulnerabilities" in a bad way, human beings are naturally vulnerable. We get hungry, and need food. But we have more than just physical needs. We need to know that someone has our back. We want to be celebrated for who we are. But it is God who provides for us what we need. Not what we think we need, but what we really need. Satan has instant gratification at the ready, simple responses, and ultimately, Satan doesn't really care about you, Satan cares about exploiting you and getting what Satan wants. It's God who ultimately cares for you and sees you for who you are: vulnerable and beloved.

The theme of this morning is "Show us our vulnerabilities and strengthen us." As I said, these vulnerabilities aren't a bad thing, they are a human thing. Vulnerabilities come from being human and having needs, to being in a situation that leaves us in such a

state, or us intentionally allowing ourselves to be seen as who we are, without pretense or artifice. We need to be shown, sometimes, that we are not superhuman, but human. Show us our vulnerabilities. Show us where we're faking it. Show us where we have deep longings and needs. Show us where we can be our authentic selves in the presence of others. And strengthen us. Strengthen us to look to God for our needs. Strengthen us in such a way that we can be vulnerable with others. Strengthen us to not give Satan, or our boss, or our parent, or whoever else we see as "over" us that Kindle. Strengthen us in such a way that we give people unhealthy power, or give power to people or principalities that don't deserve it.

Another thing I like to note in this passage is that Jesus is sent angles to attend to him. When Jesus has had enough, when Jesus told Satan to get away from him, Jesus is attended to. While for many of us, angels may seem very far away or absent entirely, there are times when we must admit that we have had our needs attended to. To call someone an angel is rather cliché, or sometimes seems sacrilegious when we refer to someone who found our lost keys, or who grabbed us a coffee while they were out. For some of us "you're an angel" is embedded in our vocabulary, at least, those of us who tend to be rather effusive.

But I'm not talking about having convenient things happen to us. I'm talking about the moments where we are really attended to. Those meals that came from the church when you just didn't have the time, energy, or the health to get it together on your own. The financial contribution from a relative, or a stranger that helped you make that payment. The phone call from someone when everything felt like it was going downhill. I'm not saying we declare ourselves "blessed." In this case, Jesus was still in the desert. Nothing about his situation had changed. But he was sent some relief, a moment of respite.

There are things that happen in our lives that turn it completely around. Or have us believing in miracles. There are also times when our situations don't change, but we nevertheless feel attended to and cared for. Earlier this week I was trying to write this sermon and had some thoughts and ideas but I was too distracted. My own life and things happening in it made waxing theological about Jesus being tempted in the desert just plain hard and I couldn't focus. Why this week, why this scripture? Temptation was the last thing on my mind.

Then I was visited. Not by an angel, and I doubt that they would appreciate being called one even as a metaphor. And not quite like Jesus was...while I was battling some demons I certainly wasn't in a desert being taunted by Satan. Things weren't quite that bad. But I was vulnerable and I was hurting, the combination of those two things making me want to isolate and feel sorry for myself. And given the snow it was quite easy to do that.

But I was attended to. Someone noticed that things were a bit difficult. And for 2 hours on a Wednesday afternoon, I got to talk, laugh, and listen my way to a better state which I didn't know I needed. Did an "angel" come and attend to me? Did they say all

the right things and have an answer for every existential question I had? Certainly not. I can't remember entirely what was said but I can certainly tell you how it made me feel. Was it divine? Maybe. All I know is a friend came over and got me out of a slump so I could feel better and write a sermon during a time where they could be doing a whole lot of other things. But who are those people in our lives if not angels? Do we need to be in a desert or on death's door to receive some divine help? Some divine inspired attendance? I don't think we do. While I don't want to minimize the times we are sent miracles that help change our lives, I don't want us to forget the times we receive divine attendance in the day to day of our lives, whether it's a lifesaving situation or merely a life enhancing situation.

As I stated earlier, sometimes our vulnerabilities are made manifest by situations that happen upon us. When I think of vulnerability and Jesus, I think of some of the most vulnerable times in my childhood experience of church. And that time was the altar call. The "every eyes closed and every head bowed" portion of the church service where I ever-so-carefully opened my eyes so I could see who had backslid the week previous. The song "Just as I am" played over and over as many folks made their way up to the front, asked for prayer, received something, and made their way back to their pew.

It was incomprehensible to me as a child, but as an adolescent who clearly knew everything, I was hyper-critical of these "vulnerability sessions" at the end of church. Were people sincere? Were some people doing this for show? Did people feel better afterward? Did it change their behavior, make a difference in their life? I knew that for my mom it didn't seem to change a whole lot, but then again, I was not having deep conversations with her about her relationship with God when I was a child.

Clearly, I am not the arbiter of what's meaningful and what's not. But my 13-year-old self quickly wrote off altar calls as manipulative and potentially dangerous. If not theologically dangerous, maybe psychologically dangerous? Spiritually dangerous? Don't people feel manipulated? Why would you intentionally make someone feel guilty, what gives someone the right to do that? What if people feel under duress? Was something contrived like this the place for an authentic spiritual experience?

This speculation can lead us down a slippery slope. But I've learned long ago just because I don't find meaning in something doesn't mean there's no meaning there, right around the time I was reminded for the 100th time that the world does not revolve around me and my experiences. In addition, no matter the theological integrity of such an endeavor, it doesn't mean that the practice doesn't have any redemption to it or in it. It doesn't mean that it can't be modified in such a way that comes across as both invitational and voluntary.

With the increased sales of confession literature, be it memoirs, creative nonfiction, or fiction, there's something about vulnerability that we like! We read biographies, news articles, exposes that lay bare other peoples' vulnerabilities, both the good and the bad. And there's something we like about that. There's something we like about a tell-all. Not all of that is healthy or good. But what does that say about us? I think it means that

there's something about vulnerability that draws us. There's something about vulnerability that's invitational. It invites us to sit and listen, and then empowers us to be vulnerable ourselves.

Vulnerability isn't for the weak. It isn't for the faint of heart. There's a lot of work that goes into making yourself vulnerable. There's a lot of work to admitting you're human! And not only are we encouraged to be vulnerable, we also need to be mindful of how we handle the vulnerability of others. Do we shun it? Is there a way we gender it and expect it from a certain gender over another, one we praise and one we don't? Do we write it off and say it's for some people but not for us? What does that say to the people around us? What does that say to little ears that might be listening?

The strength in vulnerability comes, I believe, when we've told Satan to get behind us. When we've told that traumatic memory, or that voice of self-doubt, or that nagging bit of low self-esteem, or that person who intentionally misunderstands you, or that imposter syndrome, or that wall that stands in between you and God to get out of the way. By speaking into the lies, by speaking into the false equivalencies and evil rhetoric, we are made stronger. By coming just as we are, we are strengthened into being a more resilient person than when we came. More resilient to what Satan might throw at us, more resilient to what life and its consequences might have for us. We leave the altar a changed person.

By coming to God just as we are, our open, vulnerable selves, we find true strength. We find the strength to tell whatever is holding us back to get behind us. We resist the temptations that come at us from every angle because we know who we are and whose we are. We allow ourselves to be vulnerable and to allow divine attendance to come to us, sit with us, be with us.

In a moment you're going to come forward and place a rock in a bowl of water. It's a fairly simple act. This is not an altar call, nor is it mandatory. It is for anyone who feels that they have something to give to God. This rock could stand for that which holds you back from allowing God to fully embrace you. This rock could stand for areas in your life where you'd like to be strengthened. It could stand for what holds you back in your relationship with God. It could stand for what you have to offer God, be that time, or talent, or something tangible. Whatever you have and whatever you've got going on, God sees it, knows it, and wants you to let Her carry it for you. Let Him see what's on your heart. Let God know and let God strengthen you. Come to the front with vulnerability, and leave the front with vulnerability and strength for the journey.

May the God who is in all, knows all, and cares for all be with us in our ordinary and in our extraordinary. Amen.