

March 1, 2020

Matthew 4: 1-11

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

"Passing the Test"

As you can see, the title of the sermon this morning is, "Passing the Test." At the time, I thought this was a fine title because there is a component of spiritual testing associated with the season of Lent. These are days to think about if we have what it takes when it comes to our life with God. So, it's not a bad title. But since we went to print with the title a few days ago, I've wanted to change it. A better title would be, "This Is Who We Are." Yes, I'd like to go with that, "This Is Who We Are." Knowing our identity as people of faith is more to the point of the bible's message this morning and it brings us to this question, "When was the last opportunity you had to make clear to others who you are?" I'm not talking about when you introduce yourself to someone, that happens all the time. Just the other day, I was introduced to a couple of fellows I'd never met. We shook hands, smiled, and exchanged names. "Hi, I'm Larry," I said. They shared their names with me. It was pleasant enough and we'd be technically correct to say we know each other now, except that sharing names only scratches the surface. Sure, when someone calls our names we turn and pay attention, but this morning let's think about who we are in a deeper way. What or who calls to us to get the attention of our hearts? Who are we in the depth of our souls? How we answer this points to what we value and what we depend upon as core truth. I wonder if we give enough attention to this deeper place of our identity. What are the passions that impact us? What are the certainties or the fears that leave their mark on us? I'm dating myself, I know, but do any of you remember the television comedy series, *Cheers*? Do you remember the theme song and the part of the lyric that sang about how *Cheers* was a place where everybody knows your name? OK. But where and how does it happen that we find ourselves in the place where the real us is known and how do we reflect that true self into the world?

The question of identity is an important one for Christians, especially because the gospel invites us to move beyond the name, "Christian." It's easy to say, "I am a Christian." It's harder to be a Christ-follower in the world. This isn't to say that claiming the name "Christian" has no value, it's just that we know there's more to it than just placing the "Christian" label on our lives. When we say "yes" to Jesus we are saying "yes" to the ways who he is shapes who we are. The season of Lent began this past week with our worship on Ash Wednesday. Why ashes? What's that about? Well, part of the liturgy of Ash Wednesday is receiving the mark of ash on our foreheads and hearing the words, "From dust you came and to dust you will return." This is our identity. Without God, we are dust. Without God, we are no more than ashes that blow in the wind, but this is not the end of our story. God takes the ashes and dust of our earthly existence and breathes life into us. Yes, without God we are dust but with God we are beloved children. God's "yes" to us and our "yes" to God is the key to our deepest identity. So, when is the last time you or I had the opportunity to express the fact that we are more than a bag of bones and flesh that will turn to dust some day? We are filled with the breath of God. We are infused with the Holy Spirit. We are created to be children of God and we are called to reflect that identity in the world. Yes, we carry the name of Christ because we are ready to live for Christ. This is who we are.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. It was a test of his identity. "If you are the Son of God," said the tempter. At stake was whether or not Jesus would deny his true self. Would he give in to the promises of the world? Would he grab for security that was less than eternal? Would he stay true to his calling or would he say "yes" to some other way of being? We are not surprised that Jesus passed the test and his faithfulness was the result of his preparation. The bible says he fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. This made him ready. Now, before we get distracted by wondering how could anyone do that let's step back to consider more broadly what Jesus accomplished. For 40 days he practiced saying "no." Jesus practiced saying "no" to food so that he would be ready to say "no" when decisions came that would affect who he was. Jesus is always our teacher and guide. He shows us that before we can say "yes" to God we must be ready to say "no" to other promises and powers that beckon us. Jesus knew that saying "no" at the right time would prepare him to say "yes" to God. This is who he was.

A common spiritual discipline for many Christians during the season of Lent is to give up something that they enjoy. This small self-denial can be a meaningful way to practice saying "no." This can be helpful, especially if it moves us closer to God. At the same time, the 40 days of Lent are meant to strengthen our true identity in God. We can say "no" to things on the surface but the deeper ways of saying "no" are what strengthens our resolve to be who God wants us to be. Recently I read a devotional considers the idea of giving things up for Lent. The reading makes the point that it is fairly easy to say "no" to sweets, or to fried foods, or to cigarettes, or to numerous other affections and vices. We can push away almost anything for 40 days and without much sacrifice. Beyond all of that, what does God want us to do without? What's on the list God desires us to say "no" to this Lent: self-centeredness, pride, arrogance, hurtful attitudes, closed mindedness, prejudiced attitudes. Will we say "no" in this Lenten season

to getting pulled into debates (both political and theological) that lessen the value of others because they disagree with us? Where is God working in us to strengthen us to say “no” to ways of reacting and responding to others that are hurtful or hateful? For forty days Jesus practiced saying “no” so he would be ready to say “no” to the things that could compromise who he was. Might these 40 days do the same for us?

These matters are serious, I know. But we are not overly weighed down by it. The gospel says that after Jesus passed the test angels came and ministered to him. This is the bible’s way of saying God is there for us when we need God most. Trusting this is who we are.