

**March 5, 2017 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent**

**Rev. Jen Nagel, Salem Lutheran Church, Minneapolis**

**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Psalm 32**

**Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11**

Cheryl Strayed, Wild, page 9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together. David Lose.net for this date. Augustine, Confessions.

**Grace and peace to you, from our God, Creator, + Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**The Pacific Crest Trail**, the PCT, runs north south, through Washington, Oregon and California.

Picture the Pacific coast and then go inland just 100 to 150 miles, and draw a not-so-straight-at-all-line from the Canadian border on the north, south through the Cascade Mountains, through the Sierra Nevadas, all the way to our border with Mexico, some 2,600 miles.

That's the Pacific Crest Trail that a few years back Cheryl Strayed made a bit more popular with her autobiography called Wild, and the movie that followed.

**Cheryl Strayed writes:** "My solo three-month hike on the Pacific Crest Trail had many beginnings.

There was the first, flip decision to do it, followed by the second, more serious decision to *actually* do it, and then the long third beginning, composed of weeks of shopping and packing and preparing to do it.

There was the **quitting** my job as a waitress and **finalizing** my divorce and **selling** almost everything I owned and **saying goodbye** to my friends and **visiting** my mother's grave one last time.

There was the driving across the country from Minneapolis to Portland, Oregon, and, a few days later, catching a **flight** to Los Angeles and a **ride** to the town of Mojave and **another ride** to the place where the PCT crossed a highway.

**At which point, at long last, there was the actual doing it,**

quickly followed by the grim realization of what it meant to do it, followed by the decision to quit doing it because doing it was absurd and pointless and ridiculously difficult and far more than I expected doing it would be and I was profoundly unprepared to do it.

**And then there was the real live truly doing it."**

**Matthew tells us:** "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

**Then Jesus was led up.** With the cadence of Cheryl Strayed's experience ringing in my ear, if THEN Jesus was led by the Spirit, don't you wonder what happened before THEN?

It turns out he was in the mucky baptismal waters of the River Jordan and the heavens opened and the Spirit's dove alighted and that voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I imagine Jesus still dripping wet, shivering, shaking his head, trying to make sense of the moment, those words, that promise, and before he can scarcely breathe, THEN he's being led up into the wilderness. I could leave it at that: how Jesus carries this promise, this beloved-ness into his wilderness temptation....

**But let's go another couple of words**, to the verb **LED**: Jesus was **led** up by the Spirit.

Mark's gospel uses a stronger verb: in Mark, the Holy Spirit drives him, pushes, prods, like driving cattle.

I admit it, in Matthew, where Jesus is LED, it is a bit benign, but still it's the Holy Spirit who has led him.

He hasn't volunteered for this detail, but he's led to it, by the Holy Spirit, no less!

**All this has me thinking about the challenges we face**: the temptations. .

While I might decide to head out on a canoe trip in the Boundary Waters or Quetico, or to follow Cheryl

Strayed's lead to the PCT, I don't choose temptations or trials or hard times.

I don't like them; I'd do quite a bit to avoid them, and yet, truth is: they happen to us—all of us.

I don't believe that God causes these trials, or strikes us down, or tempts us as some sort dangerous game, or a punishment, or even a test. – That's just not the kind of God we have.

**It says the Holy Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness**, but it was the devil who did the tempting, not God.

We could get caught up for a day or two talking about the devil, about Satan, the who's, what's and why's.

I acknowledge that, but really, today, here's my question: Is it possible that the Holy Spirit uses these situations when we find ourselves in the wilderness? when we find ourselves tempted?

Is it possible that God is at work in you and me, even in these times that are so very hard? I think it is.

It's the same Holy Spirit whispering through the heavens at Jesus baptism, as leads him into the wilderness, and stays with him there, and through the angels "waits on him, and brings him back again.

The same Holy Spirit.

**That's good news**: God is at work even in times of temptation, even in the trials, even in the wilderness, for ours is the God who brings life out of our situations of death, despair, even temptation.

**This season of Lent our theme is Confessing what blocks our way to God.**

That boulder on the bulletin cover captured the imagination of the Worship Planning Team.

I hope it also captures your imagination.

This week we confess that Temptation blocks our way.

The images on the back cover of the bulletin give us some visuals to draw us to consider our temptations.

Worry. Facebook. Drinking too much. That dollar bin at Target. Pornography. Over eating.

While this week we explore what tempts us; other weeks we'll be confessing what else it is that blocks our way to God: desire for control, or borders, or privilege or even death.

**With all the temptations in our readings today**, I wonder if the greatest temptation is “to forgot whose we are, and therefore to forget who we.”

As David Lose writes, “Once you don’t remember who you and whose you are, you’ll do all kinds of things to dispel the insecurity that attends any human life and to find that sense of security and acceptance...” In Genesis, the serpent undermines Eve and Adam’s relationship with God, sowing mistrust, shaking their identity.

In the Gospel, even as the devil tries to rock Jesus and his sense of identity and relationship to God, those promises of baptism tether Jesus to God with passage after passage about God’s faithfulness.

Writing in the 4th century, in his piece called Confessions, Augustine has this lovely line, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

**Like each week** during this Lenten season, today we have an opportunity not only to speak our confession, but also to write our confession, the ways we are tempted and how we confess this temptation.

Each week you’ll find small slips of paper with the bulletin.

During in worship, use that paper to jot down your prayers, your confessions, your questions, your doodling and then during our time of confession—or really anytime—bring them to the baptismal waters.

I know that confession often makes us uncomfortable, it makes us squirm a bit, maybe even skip church.

So honestly Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up among the pious.”

He goes on, “So we remain alone with our sin, trapped in lies and hypocrisy.”

**This week I’ve been remembering**, viscerally, a time when I sought out a close friend to confess.

I called him up, made an appointment, stumbled my way through the story of my experience and how I’d sinned, and then felt—in the naming, truth-telling—this tremendous sense of freedom, a weight lifted.

Bonhoeffer calls that the Breakthrough to new life, and that’s precisely what it felt like.

I’d said it. I’d confessed it. He’d heard it, in his own way absolved it, and it was done, life moved on.

**After naming all that preparation for hiking** the Pacific Crest Trail, Cheryl Strayed finally says,

“And then there was the real live truly doing it.”

People of God, in this season of Confession, we’re on the trail, facing the temptation, the road blocks.

May we really truly do it, finding the will, the grace we need to turn to God, to one another in confession.

And may the Holy Spirit that names you beloved, ground your identity, fill you with promise, inspire your confession, and forgive you, each step of the way. Amen.