

February 26, 2023 - Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

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"Turn US again, O God"

## **First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

*Human beings were formed with great care, to be in relationship with the creator, creation, and one another. The serpent's promise to the first couple that their eyes would be opened led, ironically, to the discovery only that they were naked.*

15The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3:1Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" 2The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 4But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

## **Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11**

*Jesus experiences anew the temptations that Israel faced in the wilderness. As the Son of God, he endures the testing of the evil one.*

1Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'

7Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'

11Then the devil left him, and *suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

### **Turn us again, O God.**

A particular tweet got my attention this week. It said, “I’m going to call Lent: Mark Wahlberg’s 40-day challenge from now on,” and linked a clip from the Today Show where Mark Wahlberg talks openly with host Savannah Guthrie about his Catholic faith on Ash Wednesday. He even has ashes on his forehead like many of us here today. *Did any of you see it?*

Now, this caught my attention for a few reasons - first, I often find it refreshing to see someone famous talking openly about their liturgical faith tradition. But second, I was a little...unnerved.

Seeing the description on the bottom of the Today Show screen saying “Mark Wahlberg’s 40-Day Challenge” made me realize the extent to which lent has become something it’s not meant to be.

Now, in Mark’s defense, he did try to explain a deeper spiritual meaning for him behind his observance of Lent. But it’s hard for someone being interviewed to become louder than the show’s quick description at the bottom of your screen.

The practice of giving something up or taking something on that some choose to do during Lent has in many ways become a “mini-new years resolution,” as Nathan said in our staff meeting on Tuesday. Lent, a sacred 40 days of prayer and fasting as we journey towards Easter, has been co-opted by the self-help industry as another way to make people feel bad about themselves for the sake of profits.

And I think what unnerves me the most about that reality is that even for those of us who participate in a worship life regularly, for whom the season of lent is a faithful journey, it is incredibly hard to live in this culture and not let some of that self-help culture to seep in, to not let lent become, “Pr. Maria’s 40-Day Challenge” or “Morgan’s 40-Day Challenge.” Even I bought a new book of blessings to journey with during this season this year!

Because the reality is that God doesn’t need you to lose weight or stop scrolling on facebook or not drink soda or pray a specific set

of 40 devotionals because they're set aside for Lent. There's no spiritual rewards, there's no virtue gained. And I know you know this, at least intellectually, but I think it never hurts to say it again - God loves you exactly as you are, exactly where you are. This is what God promises to us when God took on flesh and entered into this world to walk alongside us. This is what God promises to us in our baptism. Even Jesus is baptized and claimed as God's beloved immediately before he is thrust into the deprivation of the desert and the temptation of evil, in which we find him in our gospel story today.

He's fasted in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights when the devil comes to him with three temptations. And yet, each time Jesus turns again to the promise made to him before the wilderness journey began. Each time Jesus refuses to give into the devil's tempting offer for relief, for proof, for power over others he turns again to God's promise as he understands it, quoting from

Deuteronomy - scriptures that have lived in his heart for a long time as a faithful Jewish man.

The worship committee has chosen the theme, "Turn us again, O God," to guide us in this season. I'm sure there is more than one way to hear and interpret this theme, so if you hear something different, let me know. When I hear it, I hear the invitation to turn away from that which distracts me from God's love and to turn toward, again, God's promises. I hear the invitation to reflect on what gets in my way from the truth of belovedness and dignity.

What I am moved by even more, however, is that our theme is not turn "me" again, O God. But turn "us" again, O God. I hear the invitation for me, yes, but I hear the invitation for us all, together.

What does it look like for a lenten practice to be communal rather than individual? What does it look like to be turned toward God, again, together?

In preparation for this sermon I had a vague recollection that I preached on this text last time it came through the lectionary cycle, which, I discovered when I found my old sermon, was March 1, 2020 - a mere 2 weeks, maybe, before we began our pandemic lockdown and our lives forever changed. Sure we had been hearing the news of this novel virus, but I was in complete and utter denial that it was going to impact us here in Minnesota.

In that sermon, I talked about the famous marshmallow experiment from the 1970's where young kids (who happened to all be children of Stanford University faculty) were tested to see if they could delay their gratification of eating a marshmallow for 15 whole minutes in order to receive a second marshmallow. (You know the study? Now some of you for whom this is your field and know the research well, please correct me if I understand this wrong!) The results of that study showed that the kids who were able to delay gratification had higher success in school and higher

SAT scores and all sorts of assumptions were made about the correlation between the ability to delay gratification and the ability to do well in school. This then led to policies that required the teaching of delayed gratification becoming the norm in some curriculums.

Later, however, similar studies were done with a larger and more racially and economically diverse group of participants and found that once those realities were accounted for, the correlation between delayed gratification and success in school diminished almost completely. Which tells us that the measure of how well a kid will do in school has very little to do with the individual virtues of a child, say their ability to delay gratification, and much more to do with the structural and societal virtues that allow for children to ever be hungry, unhoused, or to go without their basic needs being met.

Living in this individualized culture that prizes the lucky few who can overcome adversity over the small sacrifices we all can make for the sake of the common good is heartbreaking. Seeing people so clearly struggling day in and day out - whether up close or simply because you pay attention to the news - is gut wrenching. Individualism and greed are the evils of the world we are encountering and being tempted by moment by moment in today's context.

God doesn't need you to take on a 40-day challenge during Lent for the sake of your worth or value or belovedness. Rather, God longs for us to know how much we are loved and held so that we can see even more clearly how God holds all people, all creatures, the whole planet as God's beloved.

The reality is, however, that this move is not always an easy one. The pull to assume we can be a part of addressing our culture's obsession with individualism by taking on an individual practice

ourselves is so, so strong. Our faith tradition has been made to be so deeply personal and individual that it's a challenging practice to shift the way we're oriented. And honestly, it's often easier to just try to fix myself - it's easier to just do things myself than to work to do things with others, to get all on the same page and coordinate schedules, make sure everyone is putting in what they can, etc. There's a reason everyone groans when assigned a group project. They're hard and they're slower and they force us, as individuals, to have less control of the outcome.

But this is what it is to be church, isn't it? Isn't being in community with one another here, committing to practicing our faith with honesty, integrity, curiosity, and openness, the group project we have all signed up for?

As a community, our commitments to the collective are not lacking. We live this through our social justice and climate work, through our caregiving ministries, through our support of Lutheran

Campus Ministry, through our weekly worship and prayer. This commitment to the larger good for all is central to the life of this congregation and has been for a long, long time.

And yet, we are swimming in a culture of individualism and self-help schemes co-opting our sacred seasons as “Mark Wahlberg’s 40-Day Challenge.” To live into what we trust and claim can sometimes feel like an uphill battle everyday.

As you journey through this season, I pray you may hear God’s promises for you even more clearly. You are beloved - exactly as you are, exactly where you are right now throughout this season. And in hearing, knowing, living into that promise for yourself, may we all journey together praying:

Turn us again, O God, toward You. Turn us again, O God, toward each other. Turn us again, O God, to the collective in which we live. Turn us again, O God, toward You. Amen.