

March 1, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Led into the Wilderness

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 ~ Matt 4:1-11

Way before iPods, cell phones, Xbox, Guitar Hero, or even personal computers, back when I was a teenager we used to play the game called, "Truth or Dare." Remember that game? It's the one where you sit in a circle and are forced to either tell a truth, some hidden secret you wouldn't want to tell, or to take the dare and are forced to do something extremely embarrassing. Whichever one you choose, you instantly land in a wilderness where no teen wants to be: by yourself, doing something that makes you look stupid; or revealing some personal secret your best friend might not even know.

The thing I remember about playing "Truth or Dare," sitting cross-legged in a circle on the linoleum floor of my friend's dimly lit basement, besides wishing my pants weren't so tight (yes, this was the '70s) was that I could never decide which was easier: to reveal a truth or take the dare. They both seemed risky for different reasons. What truth would I have to tell? *Or* what weird thing would I be forced to do? Risky and scary, yes, but also exciting and engaging: I couldn't wait for it to stop *and* I didn't want it to end—all at the same time.

Both lessons this morning present us with “Truth or Dare” situations. In the first scripture lesson, we heard Eve in the Garden of Eden, perhaps the first round of “Truth or Dare” ever played, where she famously took the dare of the serpent. In the second scripture lesson, we heard the devil out in the wilderness tempting, taunting Jesus, with not one, but three clever rounds of “Truth or Dare.” And thankfully, Jesus chose to smack down the devil with “Truth.”

The Garden of Eden and the desert wilderness set the stage for this season of truth-telling and dare-taking we call Lent—the 40 days (plus Sundays) before Easter. These two readings have been ushering in the First Sunday of Lent in Christian churches for over 1500 years. Yet somehow today in 2009, they seem fresh as the “first dew fall on the first grass” as we continue to face the battle between good and evil. What is good? What is evil? If only they were color coded, or clearly labeled. But you and I know, they are not.

What is good? We may think the answer to this one is easy. Certainly the Bible, our church, our country. These are all good things. However we can get confused and even do the Kingdom of God damage if we put them, as good as they are, above God. To do so breaks the second of the ten commandments. What is evil? The Devil would have us think that evil is out there. In those other people, those “not us” type of people, people of another religion or people who practice Christianity differently than we do. The Devil would have us believe that we can outgrow temptation; or that once we have confessed Christ we are somehow exempt or free from temptation. False. False, and False.

The truth is just the opposite. There is evil inside every single one of us. And actually, the closer we get to God, the *more* Satan will tempt us. Why do you think Jesus got put through the wringer the way he did? It’s no accident that all three of our synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke include the story of Jesus’ temptation just prior to launching his earthly ministry. Our Gospels also record how Jesus struggled with Satan, even after passing his 40-day test with flying colors.

The truth is: every day we’re faced with decisions, large and small, that force our hand, calling us to reveal *which* God we really serve. Yes, we may believe in God and the power of goodness, but how do we know day-to-day, hour-to-hour, the word or the action that is truly of God? How do we know, when push comes to shove in the crush of every day and we get the unexpected phone call, the budget-crushing repair bill, or the argument that erupts from nowhere, how can we be ready, like Jesus to remember who and whose we are and act accordingly?. When voices are coming from every direction, shouting and whispering, tempting and taunting us: How do we know? How do we know the word or

the action the God would have us choose?

This season we began last Wednesday, this season of Lent, beckons us into the wilderness—yes, even here in the gray, overcast wetness of late winter Ohio. A spiritual wilderness can be anywhere, for a spiritual wilderness is the place where, like Jesus, we confront our demons, so that we can name and expel them. How else can we figure out what or whom we worship and truly love more than God?

Lent is a season where we dare to walk more by faith and less by sight, opening ourselves to whatever startling revelations that God has for us at this particular time in our lives. It is the season for us to reorient our priorities, to reframe, reassess. You might call it the season of “Truth AND Dare.”

“It’s Lent, time to repent!” That doesn’t really lend itself to Hallmark cards or advertising jingles. Unlike Christmas or Easter, the season of Lent, resists being co-opted by our consumer culture. How can you sell a season that dares us to let go of compulsions, vices, addictions, and habits that we depend on to get us through? A season in which we are dared to discern, defy, and disclaim all that is false, no matter how familiar and comfortable it feels? “Tis the Season to be tested, fa la la la la la la la.” Doesn’t quite sing as well as, “Tis the Season to be jolly.” But ‘tis a season, perhaps even more essential than Christmas, for any one who wants to really know Jesus and dig deeper into the pay dirt of a transformed life. Many of us may love Christmas, but all of us need Lent.

Lent is the season for anyone who feels absolutely alone in the great storm. Lent is the season for anyone who, like Peter, got scared and started to sink in the water as he realized how out-of-the-boat he’d stepped. We have a lot of reasons to be scared. And many of us, despite our best efforts feel like we’re sinking. Sinking in a sea of unemployment, mounting debt, or mounting doubt about how or when our economy will right itself again. Yes, we all need Lent. And we need it now.

So here’s the Truth *and* Dare for all of us this Lent: ***Make a wilderness spot in your day and get closer to Jesus this Lent.*** That’s right. No matter how busy and preoccupied you may feel: carve out some time, clear the clutter, and give God some good wilderness space to work with you. If you’re immediately thinking to yourself, “She doesn’t understand, I would, but I just don’t have time to add another thing, not even to pray,” I am here to tell you something. That voice, the one telling you that you don’t have time “to just be quiet and pray,” that is *not* the voice of God speaking to you.

I will also tell you a revealing truth about me: I know about that voice. The “not- God” voice

taunting me, because I hear it, almost every day, also. It goes something like this: “You don’t have time to pray, just look at your “to do” list! If you just get going, right now, you’ll get more done.” And yes, there are days when I listen to that voice. Bad decision.

Here’s the dare again: **Find a wilderness spot in your day and get closer to Jesus.** That place and time will be a little different for each of us. Your session and pastors of Westminster started carving out their wilderness spot on Wednesday, as we follow a 40-day devotional discipline of daily prayer and faith sharing. We all have “prayer partners” and a Small Group in which we will be meeting weekly to talk about what we are hearing and learning through this prayer practice.

It’s amazing how a small change can make a big difference. How could you make just a small change in how you are relating to God this Lent? Perhaps you’ve thought about it, but never actually taken an Adult Ed class here at Westminster. Maybe that’s just not something you do. Why not, for this Lent, give it a try. We have two different classes on prayer, one starts today and the other next Sunday. Or maybe you’ve never actually read and prayed your way through one of the Lenten books for sale in the Library. Even though you always thought that would be a good idea. Do it this year. Don’t wait. Pick up one of those books and let it be a guide for your conversations with God this Lent.

But when? And where? Think about your day. Maybe you drive to work and have time in the car every day. Maybe you have a dog you walk, or dishes you do. These daily activities could become prayer time for you, if you decide to quiet other types of distraction you normally use during these routines. Try turning the TV off 20 minutes earlier than you usually do, or getting up 20 minutes earlier. Clear a little stretch of new pathway, and that’s all you’ll need.

Make a wilderness spot in your day and get closer to Jesus this Lent. That’s the Truth and Dare for all of us this season. Like the teen game: getting closer to Christ and getting in step with God’s way is scary *and* exciting all at once. We may hear things we don’t want to hear. And we may be led to do things we don’t want to do. But we know they are exactly what God and the world and people who love us have been waiting for.

The subtle serpent whispers into our ears, “You’re never really going to change. This is as good as it’s ever going to get. You’re never going to break those bad habits. Why even try? What difference can you really make? Where is this God of yours, anyway? And besides, what did this Jesus ever do for you?”