



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, March 13, 2011

Not long after George W. Bush was elected president of the United States, he saw Moses walking along on the sidewalk in Washington, D.C. George was on his way into a meeting but he yelled out to Moses and Moses just kept walking, ignoring the president's summons. So, George W. hurried after Moses, caught up to him, and said, Moses, why won't you speak to me. I just wanted to say hello to you. Grudgingly Moses responded, "Well you see sir, I was avoiding you because the last time I talked with a Bush I ended up wandering in the desert for 40 years."

That seems to be a theme we are hearing about in the Bible - 40 days and 40 nights. Last week we heard that Moses was on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights receiving the 10 commandments. The Israelites wandered 40 years in the desert. It rained on Noah and the ark for 40 days and 40 nights. Now Jesus fasts and prays in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. Even Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus tells us that he heads into the wilds of Arabia for a time.

The timing of 40 may or may not be literal, but more probably that number is used to indicate a long period of transition. And in this time of transition, decisions are made, clarity gained, and people strengthened to do the work they have been given to do. For Jesus, the time in the wilderness prepared him to begin the short two years of his public ministries. For Moses he received the guidance of the commandments. For the Israelites, they needed time to be formed to more deeply understand the covenant they were making with one God.

Those set aside times of transition built resolve and firmed up the foundation from which our biblical ancestors lived. We too are a people that can be well served by time apart – in a wilderness. We who would seek to be in ordained ministry used to be sent off to a seminary for three years. Those years apart from our "normal" life were used to polish our knowledge of things biblical and liturgical and emotional and spiritual. And I think it is a shame that we have moved away from preparing priests in that manner because the time apart is good for challenging and strengthening us at our core. Let me give you an example.

One of the papers I had to write was called a Functional Theology assignment. Basically, I had to examine the foundation of my faith in the light of how I lived my life. In other words, what I thought about God was translated into how I functioned in the world. If I said God desired kindness, did I live treating others kindly? If I said God made us to live in community, did I give my time to community or to individual pursuits?

I tell you this because I think it relates to temptations. Jesus was tempted by Satan during his time apart. Satan suggested good and helpful ways Jesus could live in the world and Jesus

rejected those temptations. Why? I think it was because he knew his foundation with God. He knew his scriptures, he knew his relationship with his Father, and he probably had a growing sense of his ministry and purpose. That is what he drew from to resist the suggestions given to him by the deceiver.

Here is how I think temptations work in our lives. Like the suggestions given to Jesus by Satan, temptations can sound really good. Note that Satan can and does quote scripture. Nowhere do the temptations sound like sin. They sound helpful or enjoyable or fruitful. I can talk myself in to eating that chocolate candy right before bed because I know I will enjoy it. I can skip getting exercise because I am finishing a work project that will make me notable in the community or at least feed my sense of self-worth. On the other hand – there are some things that have never tempted me. I have never been tempted to smoke a cigarette or to fly an airplane. Why not?

Because we are a mixed bag of differences. Some of what tempts us is influenced by our family upbringing and our friends and our community in which we live. I've never been tempted to own a pair of cowboy boots – but now...But seriously, in order to resist temptation, we must have a clear sense of who we are and what is important to us.

So, here is my suggestion to all of us today. We are in an externally declared time in the wilderness – the church season of Lent. And it is going to last 40 days and 40 nights. And we can use this time to go apart from our normal and daily habits and examine our foundations.

Popularly, people talk about giving something up for Lent – candy, smoking, late night snacks....And often those things can be and probably are areas of temptation for us to live a less than healthy lifestyle.

But I think it would be more fruitful to go deeper and take something on – take on bringing clarity to what we believe – to what is important to you – to define the foundation from which we make our decisions. In other words – to write out our own functional theology paper. Only here is an easier and simpler way to talk about this. Have any of you ever heard the sporadic NPR segment where random people read an essay they have written called – “This I believe”? That’s what I suggest we do during Lent. It would definitely be a spiritual discipline.

At the top of a paper write – “This I Believe” and then start jotting down notes to yourself. I believe God loves everyone. Question – do I love everyone? I believe violence never solves anything. Question – how do I promote peaceful ways of living? And so forth.

Then we’ll make recordings of our writings and send them in to NPR! Really, if anyone was willing to anonymously share their list – I would love to put it in the newsletter. Because this I believe – Our faith is strengthened through the stories and faith of others.

To know what we believe – Satan will flee from us and the angels minister to us.

I end with a short poem written by your former pastor – Bob Eldan. It is a Haiku – three lines.

“Spirit, drive me deep

Into the desert of life
Testing my true way.”

Thanks be to God.