

Psalm 32 Matthew 4:1-11

“Laying Burdens Down”

What to do with the temptations of Jesus? Indeed, what to do with our own temptations? A couple of stories: –

A young woman stopped into a coffee shop. When asked if she wanted any fresh Danish pastries with her coffee the woman declined saying that she was on a diet. Taking a seat by the window she noticed the man at the next table was preparing to leave, and lo and behold when he got up he left behind one perfectly good, untouched donut. Inside the young woman there was a struggle. Too soon she gave into temptation. She reached over and took the pastry from the table, and bit into it – just as the man returned carrying his second cup of coffee.



Sometimes, as a second story shows us, we are seduced by a sense of our own importance... It is said that once, while Ioannis Metaxas, the dictator of modern Greece (1936-1941), was inspecting an air base, he was invited to test a new flying boat. He took it up successfully but then tried landing on a runway. A pilot with him in the cockpit warned him that since this was a sea craft, it would be best to land it on water. The dictator gunned the engine, ascended, and then brought it safely down in the Aegean. He opened the door, declaring, “Thank you, Commander, for preventing me from making a stupid blunder”, and then briskly stepped through the opening, falling unceremoniously into the bay.

We don’t like it much, when something happens to remind us of our fallibility. And, we aren’t altogether pleased when someone else shines a light on our shortcomings. And, we surely don’t like being called sinners. When it comes to that description, we prefer to be accused of “making a mistake”, or “having a lapse in judgment” or of “telling a little white lie” – by far. Indeed, when we “make a mistake”, we hope that no one will notice. And some part of us believes that as long as we don’t let the words “I am a sinner” or “I have sinned” pass our lips or cross our minds, then we’re ok.

Yet, listen to what the psalmist says of his sinfulness, his transgressions. With perhaps more sound theology and profound psychology than he realizes, he observes: “While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ... my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” [Psalm 32:3, 4b]

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he talks about how we are all sinners, since Adam, since the early days of creation. And, Paul says, sin’s power “exercises dominion” [Romans 5:14] over us, because we let it. We keep silent about our sin, hoping God won’t notice, hoping that no one else will notice, hoping that if we don’t name it, it will mean we aren’t really guilty of sinning. And in the silence, our bodies, minds and spirits begin to decay and waste away. We are all a little like the young boy in Tony Earley’s *Jim the Boy*. He cuts down a corn stalk as he is hoeing. He tries to prop up the stalk, so no one will notice. But his attempts are easily detected by his uncle who says to him, “Jim, this was just a mistake until you tried to hide it. ... when you tried to hide it, you made it a lie.”

Have you ever heard the riddle, “What, once broken, can never be repaired, not even by strong and wise persons?” The answer is “an egg”. Regardless of any efforts on our part, a broken egg can never be put back together again; a scrambled egg can never be unscrambled.

Perhaps – just perhaps – this is part of the reason we don’t want to acknowledge our sins. Perhaps we think that once we’ve sinned, that’s it! – that like an egg that’s broken, scrambled, once our life, or our relationship with God, or our relationship with another hits a rough spot, it can’t be repaired – that there’s no rebuilding, renewing, beginning again.

However, hear again the psalmist. “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered ... Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” [Psalm 32:1, 5]

When our lives are broken with sin, we can no more put them back together again ourselves than

all the king's horses and all the king's men could help good old Humpty Dumpty. However, when our lives are broken through temptation and sin, God is able, indeed longs to give us a whole new beginning. In Jesus, through Jesus, God offers us healing and forgiveness, life and wholeness, the grace of a complete pardon, the invitation to start over, brand new. How?

Let's join Jesus in the wilderness. Matthew tells us that the same Spirit who descended on Jesus as he rose out of the baptismal waters, the same Spirit that was present when the voice of God declared that Jesus was his own beloved Son, the one who pleased and delighted God, this same Spirit, almost immediately leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights - the Biblical metaphor for a very, very long time - a block of time that mirrors the 40-year wilderness trek that the Israelites endured to get from slavery in Egypt to freedom and community in the promised land.

Have you ever wondered why a God of love would lead a beaten and hurting people on a 40-year journey, through some of the most rugged, barren, dangerous terrain, when in actual fact the distance from Egypt to the promised land required something in the nature of several months to accomplish, at the most? Have you ever wondered why a God of love, the God and father of Jesus, in fact, would send His Spirit to lead his only Son into the wilderness, to face every temptation imaginable?

Someone has defined "wilderness" this way, "a place you must get through or perish." And the Israelites, Jesus - they aren't the only ones who have encountered wildernesses in their lives, are they? Who among us hasn't experienced at least one seemingly endless time of barrenness, brokenness, ruggedness, danger, loneliness, in our lives? Who among us hasn't wondered why a God of love would permit such a time, such circumstances; how a God of love could seemingly abandon us in our desert?

Why must we struggle in the wilderness? Why did the Israelites? As they leave captivity and suffering in Egypt, and I can see that they aren't ready to be a "nation". God has chosen them, but are they ready to choose him? They need a time to determine that on which they will base their lives, as a new community, to decide to whom they will turn for guidance, leadership, counsel, help. Then, when I look at Jesus, I am a bit confused. He's the Son of God! Surely he has it worked out - that on which he'll base his life; the one to whom he'll turn. However, what if just maybe, his time in the wilderness is a time of clarifying things? Yes, he's the Son of God, but he's also human, as you and I are human. And those of us who will look at his life, who will call him Messiah and Lord, Saviour and Friend, perhaps we need to see Jesus in the wilderness, vulnerable, alone, lonely, tempted. Perhaps we need to see and hear the answers he finds for his life, in order to know what kind of Messiah, Lord, Saviour, friend he is. Not a Lord by military force. Nor a "signs and wonders" Saviour. Nor a "bread" Messiah. Jesus confirms in his Spirit, in his heart that he is a servant, the one who would even suffer for the sake of God's created. And he shows this to us, for our mountaintop moments and our wilderness times.

That may be part of the why of wilderness experiences in our lives, but what do we do with/in those wilderness times? Again, looking to the Israelites, our faith ancestors, and to Jesus, the pioneer of our faith, we can see the answer. Turn to God. Rant and rave at God, if you need to; if the loneliness and confusion are overwhelming and you cannot bear the sense of abandonment or injustice any longer. Turn to God and tell him of your hunger and your thirst, your uncertainty and your dread, your doubts and your fears. Stay the course! Stare down the temptation of the quick fixes that the world offers us when we hurt, when we are lost and lonely - when there's a hole in our middle that aches to be filled. Hear the psalmist who says, "yea though I walk through the valley of deep darkness, you are with me." Know that though you are lonely, you are not alone. Turn to God, lean on him, let him lead you. Cling to him. Worship him. Use the time in , the experience of the wilderness to learn everything you can about yourself and even about the wilderness. Learn that you can get through anything, stare down every temptation, defeat every fear, because God walks with you.