

The First Sunday in Lent
March 4-5, 2017
Matthew 4:1-11

“At the Crossroads: Betrayal”

At some point in life, we all stand at a crossroads of some sort. It could be a literal crossroads when we're trying to figure out how to get where we want to go. And sometimes even using our smart phones with apps like Google Maps and Waze aren't going to do it. But there's another kind of crossroads: a crossroads where an important decision needs to be made. You may recall in your own life when you had to decide on a pathway forward, but which road to take? That can be a very difficult place to be as we ponder what the consequences will be of taking this path or the other. The poet, Robert Frost (1874-1963), immortalized this sense of being at a crossroads in his poem, “The Road Not Taken:”

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

“At the Crossroads” is our theme for preaching on Sundays in this Lenten season. Crossroads are there for all of us. Which way? Right? Left? Straight? What awaits us down each of those choices? Which way does our heart call us to go? Which makes sense? Which way is the way of Christ the Crucified? Today, on this First Sunday in Lent, as we contemplate the temptation of Jesus, we stand at the crossroads and consider “Betrayal.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

Temptation is the theme associated with the First Sunday in Lent. We hear it loud and clear in both Old Testament (Genesis 3:1-21) and Gospel (Matthew 4:1-11) lessons. In the Garden of Eden, Satan disguised as a serpent tempts Adam and Eve to deny the truth of God's Word and do what God had commanded them not to do: eat the forbidden fruit. As we know, they listened to another voice rather than God's, and so brought sin and all its consequences into the world. Those haunting words which God spoke to our first parents were heard again in worship on Ash Wednesday as a cross of ashes was traced on our foreheads: **“You are dust and to dust you shall return”** (Genesis 3:19). We still live with the consequences of that first sin. We all will one day return to the dust from which we were first created. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus grapples with Satan himself, the father of lies (John 8:44), who called Jesus, like Adam and Eve, to deny the truth of God's Word. Not once or twice, but three times, Satan comes to Jesus with a temptation: “You've been fasting for forty days! You deserve to eat! Think of yourself! Command these stones to become bread.” “Give the people a show and demonstrate who you really are, if, in fact you really are the Son of God. Throw yourself down from pinnacle of the temple so that God can rescue you and the people will be amazed.” “All the power and glory of the world is mine, and I will give it all to you if you fall down and worship me.” But giving in to any of these temptations would mean that Jesus would betray who he is as the Son of God. Doesn't it come down to this for us as well? Giving in to temptation leads to betrayal as we substitute the truth of God's will and purpose for our lives with a lie; a shabby substitute of what God would have for us. Whenever temptation comes calling in our lives, we stand at a crossroads. What will we do?

In our worship for Ash Wednesday this past week, included in the service was an Exhortation before the Confession. I want to share this with you again today as it speaks to the situation at hand:

Brothers and sisters in Christ: God created us to experience joy in communion with him, to love all humanity, and to live in harmony with all of his creation. But sin separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, and so we do not enjoy the life our Creator intended for us. Also, by our sin we grieve our Father, who does not desire us to come under his judgment, but to turn to him and live.

As disciples of the Lord Jesus we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor. Repentance, fasting, prayer, and works of love – the discipline of Lent – help us to wage our spiritual warfare. I invite you, therefore, to commit yourselves to this struggle and confess your sins, asking our Father for strength to persevere in your Lenten discipline.

“We are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor.” That’s always our calling as the baptized people of Christ, but especially so in this Lenten season. What are those crossroads in your life that you are struggling with? Will choosing one pathway, as Adam and Eve did, lead to sin, to separation from God and those around us, and lead ultimately to death, rather than life? At times, we trivialize this struggle in the individualistic culture that surrounds us. After all, life is about my personal fulfillment and pleasure, isn’t it? It’s my life, isn’t it? In our struggle with temptation that leads to betrayal, we find it’s easier to pin the blame on others, rather than ourselves, just as Adam and Eve did: **“The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate... The serpent deceived me, and I ate”** (Genesis 3:12-13). Lent is about going deep into our soul, making careful and honest examination of what we find, and coming clean with God who comes looking for us just as He did with our first parents in the Garden. The Lord God is on the hunt for his children who are hiding in fear and shame, and He comes asking that simple question: **“Where are you?”** (Genesis 3:9). Truth is, God already knows what we are – dust, and He knows where we are – separated from him and one another by our sin and disobedience. That’s the ugly reality of our situation, but it’s not the final word.

God has come looking for us in his beloved Son, Jesus, who has entered the ugly reality of our sin and separation. Jesus has come to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. In the temptations that he endured, Jesus did not betray his Father or himself. He remained true to God’s will and purpose. Our hope is in Jesus, who himself was betrayed by one of his own for thirty pieces of silver, setting in motion a chain of events that would lead to his suffering, death, and resurrection. But it is through Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection that we have been set free! The power of sin and temptation, the power of the Tempter himself, has been broken by the redeeming work of Christ. This is what Paul writes about in today’s Epistle lesson (Romans 5:12-19): **“For if many died through one man’s [Adam’s] trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace for that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many... For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”**

When we find ourselves at a crossroads in life, struggling with temptation that will lead to betrayal, our hope is in Jesus alone, who was himself tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). In this Lenten season, but in every season of life, **“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Hebrews 12:1-2). Amen.