

March 6, 2022 First Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 4:1-14a

"What Have You Packed?"

Douglas T. King

An extra sweater or those running shoes in case the weather is nice and I go for a run one morning? Another dress or a pair of jeans? The flight was in a couple of hours. She had about 15 more minutes to pack before her Uber picked her up. Only so much room in the suitcase. What to take? What to leave? How to be prepared for everything she might need when she was going to be away for a week? What if it rained? What if it got hot? What if she somehow got tickets to the opera?

We have all been there. Trying to prepare for every eventuality as we face the limited square inches to be found in a suitcase. How can we ever be prepared for all of the possibilities? And in the end, of course we can't. We throw in the running shoes, which go unused because it is too chilly, and we wish we had that extra sweater. It is impossible to prepare for every eventuality that may occur on a trip just as it is impossible to prepare for every eventuality that may occur in our lives.

This morning's text from Luke is about Jesus preparing to begin his ministry. Before he does a moment of teaching, or healing, or feeding people, he faces temptation in the wilderness. What kind of savior will he be? How will this person, fully God and fully human navigate the world? How will

he lead us all to redemption? These are the identity questions with which he will wrestle in the wilderness.

We are told Jesus is famished. We picture him weak and vulnerable and alone. It would be easy to imagine he might be doubting whether he was up to the task of being the savior of the world. God or not, he was a mortal man, all too aware of his vulnerability, as he made his way through the vast emptiness before him.

As it grew dark and cold and he huddled in whatever clothing he had on his back, I imagine the voice of the adversary whispering in his ear. "You know you do not need to be so hungry. If you choose you could snap your fingers and have all the bread you want." And then the adversary whispered, "If you choose, you do not need to be so powerless, I will give you power over the entire world." And the adversary whispers one more tantalizing offer, "If you choose, you do not need to be so mortal, you can demand that the angels protect you from all harm."

As we know, Jesus rejects these three temptations. He chooses not to feed himself, or accept the power of the world, or shield himself from all harm. He chooses to step into his ministry in utter vulnerability.

At this point I have to say I would have likely chosen to feed myself, take the power, and protect myself from all harm. Frankly, Jesus makes three very curious choices. They are not choices that make sense for God to make. If you have the power to transform all that surrounds you, why would you lay that power down even for a moment? And they are choices that

certainly do not make sense for a human to make. In the midst of all of that vulnerability why would you not ensure your basic needs and safety?

Perhaps because we have heard this story told and retold, as it rolls around on every first Sunday in Lent in one gospel or another, we have become inured to how counterintuitive it is. Look, it just makes no sense. If Jesus is preparing to begin his ministry to save the world, why would he choose to lay down such power? Returning to our suitcase analogy, if Jesus does not pack any power to care for or protect himself what exactly is left for Jesus to pack as he begins this arduous journey of his ministry? He certainly seems to be only leaving things behind.

But Jesus is not empty-handed. As he leaves the wilderness to begin his ministry, he has the one thing he carried with him when he ventured into the wilderness. The poet, Jan Richardson, says it like this,

"If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved..."

These are the opening words to her poem "Beloved Is Where We Begin."

Before Jesus is led into the wilderness he is baptized by John in the river Jordan. And as you recall the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove and a voice comes from heaven to announce to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This is what Jesus carried into the wilderness and then on into his ministry, the blessing that he was beloved.

Let's listen to the beginning of the first and final verses of our text. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Holy Spirit..." and "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee..." It is interesting that this entire temptation episode is bracketed by an announcement that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not above Jesus, or beside Jesus, The Spirit is within Jesus filling him up.

Jesus' suitcase is full of God's Spirit. As he wandered weak and vulnerable through the wilderness, his belly might have been empty but he is not empty-handed. His suitcase is full of the blessing of being beloved. When Jesus is being offered the temptations of creating bread, and seizing power, and guaranteeing his safety, these are not simple accept or do not accept propositions. If he accepts these temptations he will need to empty the suitcase of his blessing so that he may carry the powers laid out before him.

The suitcase will not hold all of these things. Jesus has to choose what will serve him best as he seeks to save the world. Will he attempt to save the world by being devoid of all weakness, with a full belly, immense political power and

utter invincibility? Or will he save the world by bearing the blessing of being beloved? Well, this is not much of a cliffhanger. We know the path he chose.

It is worth noting the subtle change that occurs in our two bracketed statements in this text. The opening statement announces Jesus is full of the Spirit. The closing statement, which is the opening of his ministry, says that he is "filled with the power of the Spirit..." In case we might still look longingly back on the power Jesus lays aside that he may carry the blessing of being beloved, we are told that there is great power to be found in that blessing.

Clearly this text about Jesus' choices has a great deal to teach us about who Jesus is and what kind of savior he will be. But, of course, we cannot help but wonder what it has to teach us about our own choices. The first thing to say is that there is no perfect parallel in this text. We are not Jesus. We are not saviors. We do not face the same choices he does. But in our baptism we too are claimed as beloved. And we do face choices of our own. We do have our own suitcase with which we make our way through life. And just like when we pack any suitcase for a trip we cannot bring everything along. What do we need most as we walk this journey?

Now, it is not as simple as saying if we carry the blessing of being one of God's beloved we can carry nothing else. But it is also important to note that we can easily crowd out our blessing of being one of God's beloved. As we are filling our suitcase with other things that can be important and good in their own rite, like career success, monetary rewards, public

prestige, just to name a few, it does not take much to have the blessing we have been offered fall out of a side pocket. Our blessing can forgotten.

About a month ago in our adult education class we studied the portion of Jesus' farewell discourse where he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." In other words as we are packing the suitcase of essentials we will need for this life, we will indeed need the blessing of being one of God's beloved. Rain or shine, whatever may come in our lives, at whatever point we are in life, a recently confirmed confirmation student, or a thirty year member of this congregation, our identity of being beloved by God will carry us through whatever may come.

As we enter this Lenten season, let each of us consider the question of whether we enter into the world each day intentionally carrying with us the blessing of being beloved by God. If we do, we will be prepared for anything and everything. And, maybe throw in that extra sweater as well.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Richardson, Jan, "*Circle of Grace*," Wanton Gospeller Press, Orlando, Florida, 2015