

St. Brendan's  
Matthew 1:1-11  
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Theologian and author Dr. Diana Butler Bass points out in her new book, *A Beautiful Year*, that Lent begins when many of us are about four weeks into breaking our New Year's resolutions. She goes on, "*Less than two months ago, we promised ourselves that this year would be different. We would finally lose weight, stop smoking, be nicer to the people next door, volunteer at the Homeless Shelter, make it to church at least twice a month, and spend more time with the kids.*" And she ends by asking us, "*How are we doing?*"

Now the church tells us that Lent should be a time of prayer, fasting and repentance. I remember my wonderful Hebrew professor who our first year announced to the class that he always gave up vanilla ice cream as a way of fasting. I loved this professor, but he spent almost every class session during Lent describing what he was missing by giving up vanilla ice cream...and I'm not sure talking about vanilla ice cream every single class during Lent for three years is really indicative of the spiritual discipline of fasting.

I wonder if we might do as well to follow Jesus' example of simply practicing our faith as a means to find that spring of God's love in our own particular wilderness. That's certainly what Jesus is doing.

What does it mean to practice faith? It means as Moses reminds the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy to love God with our whole heart and soul and strength. Isn't that just what Jesus is showing us as he counters the devil. It means as Jesus shows us in this passage, trusting God's faithfulness.

If I'm honest, I must tell you Matthew's story of Jesus' temptations is a passage that used to get my back up. What went through my young head was.... "Well of course Jesus isn't tempted because Jesus is God's son. Jesus is perfect." That lasted through my years in Sunday School...as I got older, I tended to skim over the reading and think to myself, it's one of those stories Matthew uses to prove how we are all supposed to react to temptation....a sort of caveat to what is being asked of us to be a good, faithful person.

I did not skim the passage this time because I knew it was appointed for today and I was going to preach on it. And what seems to happen when I take the time to engage in Scripture, I am always awed by how every time, God has something new to show me.

Richard Rohr describes the Bible as a "source of ongoing revelation and transformation." He says that many of us wish the Bible was "seven habits for highly effective people" that will simply deliver the right conclusions. Rohr then asks the question, "What does all this monotonous history, out of date science and flat-out violence have to do with anything that matters?" His answer is that the Bible doesn't give us conclusions but it "gives us both the process of getting there and the inner and outer authority to trust the process..."

Matthew is writing his gospel at a time when the people are suffering from the terrible oppression, corruption and tyranny of the Roman Empire. He fears that the people will lose sight of their faith in God's realm...that realm in which compassion and mercy and love, above all else love, are offered to us. Matthew wants us to know that if we do not hold to our faith, we will surely be stuck living the same selfish, violent, self-destructive lives as before.

In her book, *Prayer in the Night*, the Rev. Trish Harrison-Warner reminds us too that while we often read that the Old Testament prophets and the psalmists cry to God to wake up, there is no such call in the New Testament because God has already acted through the Incarnation. She writes, "Jesus made it clear. God is with us; he knows our frailty and vulnerability as certainly as he knows the skin on his own hands." We need to remember that...no matter how bad things get, God has already acted by giving us Jesus.

Matthew's story of Jesus' resistance to the Devil's temptations is rooted in his faith in God's promise to always be with us wherever we find ourselves. It has nothing to do with showing us what it means to be a good person which is the line one often hears in Sunday School...it has nothing to do with bad or good as I once thought.

Does that word resistance sound familiar? There is no question that the events of the last few weeks in Minneapolis and now in Maine feel a lot like what is happening to Matthew's people. It certainly feels as if what we are now witnessing in this country is no less than another struggle between God and the devil. We are being tested too.

As the faithful Jew that Jesus is, he turns to Scripture, to the book of Deuteronomy to answer the devil. Deuteronomy is of course a series of sermons delivered to the Israelites on the plains of Moab before they entered the Promised land of Canaan. It is basically a restatement of the covenant laws God previously gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

When he was asked to turn stones into bread, he quoted Deuteronomy chapter 8 where it says we do not live by bread alone but by God's word. When Jesus is asked to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, he tells the devil not to put God to the test which is in chapter 16. And finally, when the devil tells Jesus he will give him power over all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus responds with another part of chapter 16, "*Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*"

Today those who have the power want us to replace justice, and compassion and mercy with injustice, cruelty and force just as happened in Israel all those years ago. It is hard not to be tempted to turn the other way, to stop listening to the news, to pretend what is happening is not really happening. Matthew is trying to remind his people and now us that yielding to this temptation is to continue to live out our broken lives, our self-destructive ways. Reading Matthew's story of Jesus' temptations offers us a way, a process, to hang on as Jesus hung on, to live towards the realm of God through our faith.

What Matthew's story tells us is that God has gone ahead of us and will meet us in the wilderness, whatever that looks like for us. It could be the wilderness of grief, or anger, of despair or addiction, no wilderness is too far for God.

In these coming 40 days, may we find ways prepare our hearts... to slow down, to make time for silence, for reflection and prayer, to make time to live into the sacred stories of the season of Lent that we might be transformed by the assurance that God is with us...that God's love is our spring in the desert just as it was that long ago time for Jesus who was tested but did not despair, who was hungry but did not eat who was offered the power over all the kingdoms of the earth but turned it down.

I want to end with a prayer from Canon Leonard Hamlin who is Canon Missioner and Minister of Equity and Justice at the National Cathedral.

Almighty God, in this holy season of Lent, prepare me to be a sanctuary. As I walk the road toward the cross, strip away what is not of you. Where sin has lingered, cleanse me. Where faith has grown weary, renew me. Create in me a clean heart, O God, make my life pure and holy. Amen