

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 ~ Matt 4:1-11

Led Into the Wilderness

First Sunday of Lent ~ March 1, 2020 ~ Communion Meditation

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Way before Smart Phones, Instagram, or Snapchat; before Counter Strike, League of Legends or Super Mario; even before personal computers, way back when I was a teenager, we used to play the game called “Truth or Dare.” Remember that game? It’s the one where you sit in a circle and are forced to either tell a truth, some deep dark hidden secret you never told before, or you have to take a dare to do something extremely embarrassing. Whichever one you choose; you instantly land in a wilderness where no teenager wants to be: doing something that makes you look stupid; or revealing some personal secret your best friend might not even know.

The thing I remember about playing “Truth or Dare,” sitting cross-legged in a circle on the linoleum floor of my friend’s dimly lit basement, besides wishing my pants weren’t so tight (yes, this was the 70’s) was that I could never decide which was the better choice: to reveal a truth or take the dare. They both seemed risky for different reasons. What truth would I have to tell? *Or* what weird thing would I be forced to do? Risky and scary, yes, but also exciting and engaging: I couldn’t wait for it to stop *and* I didn’t want it to end—all at the same time.

Both scripture lessons this morning present us with “Truth or Dare” situations. In the first scripture lesson, we heard Eve in the Garden of Eden, perhaps the first round of “Truth or Dare” ever played, where she famously took the dare of the serpent. In the second scripture lesson, we heard the devil tempting, taunting Jesus out in the wilderness, with not one, but three clever rounds of “Truth or Dare.” And thankfully, Jesus chose to smack down the devil with “Truth.”

The Garden of Eden and the desert wilderness set the stage for the season of truth-telling and dare-taking we call **Lent**: The 40 days (plus Sundays) before Easter. These two readings have been ushering in the First Sunday of Lent in Christian churches for over 1500 years. Yet still today, here in 2020, they reveal the issue at the heart of our deepest questions and conflicts, personally and politically. Yes, the battle between good and evil.

What is good? We may think the answer to this one is easy. Certainly the Bible, our church, our family, our country. These are all good things we hold dear. However, whenever we put any of them, as good as they are, above our love for God, warning signs should flash before our eyes. Why? When we put them ahead of our love for and our allegiance to God, we are breaking the second of the ten commandments and playing into the devil’s hand.

What is evil? The devil would have us think that evil is out there. In those other people, those “not us” groups of people, those whom we consider to be different than we are because of bad things they have done, or because their religion, culture or politics contradict ours. The devil also wants us to believe that once we have confessed Christ as our Lord and Savior we are somehow instantly freed from temptation. False. False, and False.

The truth is just the opposite. There is evil inside every single one of us. And actually, the closer we get to God, the *more* Satan will tempt us. Why do you think Jesus was led into the wilderness for this dust up with the tempter right after he was baptized by John? It’s no accident that all three of our synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke include the story of Jesus’ temptation just prior to launching his earthly ministry. But the story of Jesus battling with the devil doesn’t end with that initial confrontation. Our gospels record how Jesus’ battle with Satan continued throughout his life on earth. So human of Jesus.

The truth is: every day we’re faced with decisions, large and small, that force our hand, calling us to reveal *which* God we really serve. Yes, we may believe in God and the power of goodness, but how do we know hour-to-hour, day-to-day, the word or the action that is truly of God? How can we tell what is a half-truth, dressed up like a whole truth? Like in the story of the serpent and Eve in the garden in Genesis 2. It was true, as the serpent said, she would not die if she ate from that tree. But it was not true that she would become like God. As Joyce Rupp in her book, *Jesus, Friend of My Soul*, has written, “Who among us has not been tempted away from what is good? These choices include taking the easy way out or choosing the more difficult path that involves our responsibility, opening our mouths or keeping them shut, walling off our hearts or taking the bricks down, fighting and resisting or trying to make peace, running away or remaining in a tough commitment, and turning away or turning toward those who suffer unfairness.”ⁱ

So, how can we remember who and whose we are, how can we be ready, (like Jesus was with the devil in the wilderness), when push comes to shove on what we thought was going to be a regular day and then, out of nowhere the bottom drops out. We have so many voices coming from every direction, shouting and whispering, tempting and taunting us: How can we choose the right word or action that is true to the Light in us?

The season we began last Wednesday, this season of Lent, beckons us into the wilderness. A spiritual wilderness can be anywhere: It is the place where, like Jesus, we confront our demons, a place where we are led by the Spirit so that we can learn to see the evil that tempts us, name it and expel it. How else can we discern what or whom we truly love more than God? Lent is a season where we dare to walk more by faith and less by sight, opening ourselves to whatever startling revelations that God has for us at this

particular time in our lives. It is the season for us to reorient our priorities, to reframe, reassess. You might call it the season of “Truth AND Dare.”

“It’s Lent, time to repent!” Doesn’t really lend itself to Hallmark cards or internet memes. Unlike Christmas or Easter, the season of Lent, resists being co-opted by our consumer culture. How can you sell a season which dares us to let go of compulsions, vices, addictions, and habits that we depend on to get us through? A season in which we are dared to discern, defy, and disclaim all that is false, no matter how familiar and comfortable it feels? “Tis the Season to be tested, fa la la la la la la la.” But ‘tis a season, perhaps even more essential than Christmas, for any one who wants to really know Jesus and dig deeper into the pay dirt of a transformed life. Many of us may love Christmas more, but we all need lent.

Here's the good news: Lent is the season for anyone who feels like they are absolutely alone in a raging storm. Lent is the season for anyone who can relate to Peter who trusted Jesus enough to get out of the boat and start walking on the water when Jesus commanded him with the word, “Come!” But then got really scared by the strong wind and started to sink in the water as he realized how out-of-the-boat he’d stepped. We have a lot of reasons to be scared. And many of us, despite our best efforts feel like we’re sinking. Sinking in a sea of mounting debt, mounting deliberations, or mounting doubt about how or when our political system will right itself. Or how or when we will slow the cataclysmic course of climate change. Yes, we all need Lent. And we need it now.

So here’s my Truth *and* Dare for all of us this Lent: ***Find a wilderness spot in your day and get closer to Jesus*** in these next 40, well today it’s 36 days. That’s right. No matter how busy and preoccupied you may feel: carve out some time, clear the clutter, and let God lead you into some good wilderness space that works for you. If you’re thinking, “She doesn’t understand, I would, but I just don’t have time to add another thing, not even to pray,” I am here to tell you something. That voice, the one telling you that you don’t have time “to just be still and pray,” that is not the voice of God speaking to you. That is the tempter. Here’s a revealing truth about me: I know that voice. The tempter taunting me: “You don’t have time to pray, just look at your “to do” list!, if you just get going, right now, you’ll get more done.” And yes, there are days when I let myself be led by that voice. Bad decision.

Find a wilderness spot in your day and get closer to Jesus this Lent. That’s the “Truth and Dare” for all of us this season. That wilderness spot will be different for each of us. But when? And where? Think about your day. Maybe you drive to work and have time in the car every day. Maybe you have a dog you walk, or dishes you do. These daily activities could become prayer time for you, if you decide to quiet other types of distraction you normally use during these routines. Try shutting down your devices or your TV 20 minutes earlier than you usually do, or getting up 20 minutes earlier. Clear a little stretch of new pathway, and that’s all you’ll need. Jesus is ready, waiting to hear

your honest everything. The more you dare to be honest with Jesus, the more life-giving your prayer will be.

Like the teen game: getting closer to Christ and getting in step with God's way is scary *and* exciting all at once. We may hear things we don't want to hear. And we may be led to do things we don't want to do. But we know they are exactly what God and the world and people who love us have been waiting for.

Now, as we prepare to the Table, the very table where Christ's mercy and presence, Christ's suffering and victory are offered, the subtle serpent whispers into our ears, "Sure, you can do this, but you're never *really* going to change. You're never going to break those bad habits. Why even try? What difference can you really make? Where is this God of yours, anyway? And besides, what did this Jesus ever do for you?"

ⁱ Joyce Rupp, *Jesus, Friend of My Soul: Reflections for the Lenten Journey*, (Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, IN, 2020), pp. 16-17.