



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
1 March 2020
Sermon: Deserts
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The night the church burned, he could have just walked away. After all, he had been the church’s pastor for 34 years, far more than anyone expected, and the building was a total loss.¹ Starting in the basement furnace, the flames spread quickly to every corner of the church. Despite the best efforts of more than 100 firefighters, from 11 departments and 3 counties, nothing could be salvaged; the church burned to the ground; the steeple collapsed. Smoke rose from the charred remains at the center of town for days. The congregation had less than a hundred members. On any given Sunday, some 40 people would show up, not a bad showing actually, in a town of just 700, but, that night, Pastor Max Paterson had to wonder if the small congregation of this small town would survive.

This was March of 1999; the ruined church was First Baptist of Stantonsburg, North Carolina, a one stoplight town on the outskirts of Wilson, just east of Raleigh. Stantonsburg is primarily farmland; it’s barely even a town, more like a village. It has a Piggily Wiggly, a Chinese takeout, and, for a while, an Andy’s hamburgers, though that’s closed now. It has two neighborhoods, if you want to call them that, more like a handful

¹ WRAL, “Wilson County Congregation Vows to Rebuild Church.” March 11, 1999. <https://www.wral.com/news/local/story/133091/>

of streets, each less than half the length of Kimberly. One side of town is black, the other white, separated, stereotypically, by train tracks.

Thirty-four years of ministry in this, I'm sorry, this barely-there-town, and then the church burns to the ground. I try to put myself in Max's shoes that evening, as the glowing flames broke the darkness that frenzied night. At that time, he was in his early sixties, already a cancer survivor, his wife retired, his children grown and out of the house. The church could barely afford to pay Max a living wage. The prospect of rebuilding had to be daunting with so few resources. Did he have the energy, at the end of his career, to rebuild, or was it time to call it and move on? Did he wonder if the congregation would even stick together through the process? Or would people gradually move on to the larger, less burned down churches of nearby towns?

Of course, he didn't walk away; he stayed and lead the rebuilding. A beautiful red-brick church now stands in the middle of town, a monument to the congregation's faithfulness in the midst of tragedy and uncertainty. Max was the senior pastor when I served as youth director of First Baptist Stantonsburg in the mid 2000s. In his final years, Max was a talker, and he loved to tell the story of the church fire. I'm pretty sure he told it to me the first time I met him, and then he told it to me again, and again, many times actually. Being the quiet and polite young man that you all know me to be, I'd often just let him retell the story. But, in all that time, he never told me about what he thought that

March night, watching the church he had served his whole career burn down to the ground.

The temptations that Jesus faces in the wilderness may seem remote. We don't come face to face with the devil, and turning stones to bread, manipulating angels, and bargaining for control of earth's kingdoms do not speak directly to our experiences. But the heart of the temptations is the question I have for Max on that night, made incandescent by flames fueled with church walls: Is faith enough in the wilderness, at the end of your rope, when you see it all come tumbling down? Is faith enough when you have to start over? Has it been enough for you?

Did faith guide you in a new place, a new school, a new town, a new church? Is faith enough when your child leaves home for college, or when the dust settles on a divorce, when your sibling calls in the middle of the night and says, mom had a bad fall again. Is faith enough when the doctor calls you directly, wanting to go over your test results? Or if your paycheck won't cover your bills? Or when you feel stuck in a life on autopilot? Or you couldn't turn on the news this weekend without worrying about your family, your children, your elderly parents? Is faith enough? Has faith been enough for you in the desert?

If, as the author of Hebrews says, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1), then the devil tempts Jesus to turn to something more tangible than faith. He entices the Christ toward some confirmation that he is God's

son, the Beloved, confirmation of what the voice from heaven claimed after Jesus's baptism just before the scene in the wilderness in Matthew, chapter 3. The tempter uses the Spirit's words against Jesus, "If you are the Son of God," he says repeatedly. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread"; "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself from this high place so the angels will rescue you." In other words, Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, is asked to have faith in God's faithfulness, while the tempter pushes him to grasp for things that can be seen: bread, and angels, and kingdoms. These temptations seem less remote when we are asked to live by faith, when we sit and watch the flames, the collapse of what we have always known.

It was the last hour of the last day of the Racial Equity Institute, on a warm July afternoon.² I sat in a circle of forty participants, in a large lecture hall on the UNCA campus. We had spent the last two days in seminars learning to see the systemic racism built into the past 250 years of this country's history. It had been an emotional and tense day; you could feel the built-up emotion in the room. Some of the people of color were astonished while others left unsurprised when many of the whites in the room acted like we were hearing all this for the first time. The white people carried varying levels of shame or denial or exasperation.

And then, one of our teachers, a doctor of liberation psychology, who was himself Latino, led a final exercise. He went around the room, grouping participants by their race.

² <https://www.racialequityinstitute.com>

He asked us, what do you like about being your race. He started, of course, with the whites, because, you know, historically, we like to go first. Things got awkward really quickly. Again, we had just spent two days learning about the systemic racial privilege of white supremacy - systems of plunder, murder, and discrimination - in a room full of white, black, brown, and Asian participants. And then we're asked, to say, one by one, in front of everyone, with a microphone, what do you like about being white. Needless to say, it wasn't my most eloquent answer. When it came to my turn, I just kept shaking my head until he moved on to another, more willing participant.

It was a different story though with many of the participants of color. In varying, idiosyncratic ways, each person talked about culture, about heritage, food and dance, religion and language, art and scholarship, resilience and defiance. Many could say they were proud to be Black, or Puerto Rican, or Korean, in ways that I could not say I was proud to be white. And that was the point of the exercise: whiteness trades heritage for privilege.

Adam and Eve failed their test; they ate the fruit. Rather than rely on God's commandments and promises, instead of living by faith, they strove to be gods themselves. And so, our ancestors chose whiteness, or were conscripted into whiteness, at a cost. We had to leave behind our ethnicity, our roots, our people. In the wilderness, whiteness chooses privilege, chooses violence, stolen bread rather than the word of God,

the kingdoms in exchange for idol worship. In the process, we lose ourselves in whiteness.

Such can be the consequence of temptation. When faith falters, when we look for something more tangible, more concrete, we risk losing a part of ourselves. We risk losing sight of our truth, that we and everyone who we meet are beloved children of God.

Siblings in faith, Lent 2020 is a wilderness time. It is for our country, for our world, and for many of you personally. It's a time when we ask ourselves, is faith really enough? Do you believe that you are a beloved child of God? Will you hold onto that, in your Lenten journey this year, wherever it takes us?

Remember, you do not go on this journey alone. When faith stumbles, it can also be picked back up. No one would have faulted Max if his faith turned to despair on the night the church burned. But as the hours wore on and the smoke rose into the night sky, he was not on the street alone. He was surrounded by his church members, couples he had married, children he had baptized, family members of those he had buried – people with whom he shared three decades of the life of faith together. Their faith carried him that night, and his faith carried theirs.

I know this because that community did the same thing for me, on a much more mundane journey through the uncertainty of my college years. When my faith faltered, their faith carried me. When I fell on my face in the early years of youth ministry, their faith carried me. When I wondered if I had just imagined that God was calling me to the

ministry, their faith carried me. When I wasn't sure I wanted to be a Christian any more, if I believed any of it any more, if I could believe in the church any more, their faith carried me. Just a few years later, when I spoke to Max for the last time, as he was sitting on a hospice bed with failing kidneys, their faith carried me still.

Siblings in Christ, look around you: Who is it that carries your faith, when it doesn't seem strong enough? Who showed you that the God we proclaim, and the love we hold, and the justice we seek are real? This church is taking an ongoing look at our participation in the very systems examined at the Racial Justice Institute. We've learned how white churches like ours have supported, and many, if not most, still support the systems of white supremacy, or simply turn a blind eye. What brings you back to this place? What carries your faith in the church, in the God of grace and justice? It is the faith of the people sitting beside you, and of the saints who came before you and showed you the love of God, and the faith of the Christ who walked through the desert. May they carry you, in the days ahead, through the deserts that lie ahead. Amen.