

Squamish United Church  
Rev. Karen Millard  
Lent 1

March 9, 2014

Scripture Reading:  
Matthew 4:1-11

### **Planting Hope in the Wilderness**

During the season of Lent we are called to examine life. To ask Do you trust God? Are you willing to live your life as if God's promises in scripture are true? God offers you a chance to give your whole trust. God is still holding out hope that you will one day come home to the Garden. And so this lenten season as we examine our lives, and we wrestle in the wilderness we as a community at the same time will be heading to the garden and planting hope even in the most difficult times of our lives as individuals and as a congregation. That may be what our communal lenten practice needs to be. Planting hope in this place.

I didn't have us read the Genesis story of temptation in the garden today because it was long, and I am going to rightly or wrongly assume you have heard it before. Both the temptation in the garden and the temptation of Jesus ask "who is going to be in charge in our world, and more importantly in our lives?" Where is our focus? What is most important?

In Genesis Adam and Eve want to be in charge, so they eat the fruit to make them wise and God-like. They thought if they ate the fruit they would no longer need God.

"On the other hand, in our reading from Matthew, Jesus shows far greater wisdom and faith. He did not reach for the quick answer to the hungers of life by turning stones into bread, nor did he go for the spotlight of instant fame by defying the laws of gravity and jumping from the pinnacle of the temple, nor did he reach for the reins of power; rather he stated his trust in God over and over again. He was determined to serve God on God's terms. He was settling for himself the answer to the question of who was in charge as he set out to begin his ministry, a ministry that was to proclaim good news to the poor and release for the captives, a commitment that would lead him through the journey ahead." A ministry that we as people of faith are now called to.

I wonder, If you were to stop and ponder the question of who or what is in charge of your life, how would you respond? Most of us know we are supposed to respond. "God of course." But would that be an honest answer?

The Rev. Dr. B. Wiley Stephens writes "We might laugh at Adam and Eve falling for the spiel of a talking snake to determine their eternal destiny, but are we much different when we make choices based on convenience instead of what needs to be done? Or we base our decisions on what make us happy or brings us gratification instead of making the world a better place in which to live. We can appear so foolish when one's faith is all about one's self and one's

needs. In our worship life and our service for God and church, we are constantly tempted to serve our needs and desires rather than seek what our God desires so we might serve God. People leaving the membership of the church sometimes say, "I'm not getting fed there," instead of asking, "How can I feed others?" Another question to ask in the face of this spiritual hunger is, "What am I doing to be fed, is my prayer life strong and daily, am I faithful in my attendance, do I spend time in the Word, and am I open to new ways to understand?"<sup>1</sup> Am I planting new life and hope in the place I live and encounter. Am I offering love and life to the people around me? How am I feeding others?

Sometimes the challenge of God can be uncomfortable, sometimes we are called to take a different direction, and to live a different way. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "Just when you think you have reached the level of self giving love, you have probably just gotten to the level of enlightened self-interest." The temptation is for us to shape our God (and others) in our way of thinking instead of being shaped by the true God according to His will.

Attempting to shape people and God to our wills leaves us in the barren wilderness of scarcity. Stephens points out Adam and Eve sought to overpower God on full stomachs, while Jesus sought to do God's will on a stomach that was empty.

"Maybe we learn that risk when we are so blessed compared to most of the world. We must seem to others to live in a Garden of Eden. We have an abundance of most of whatever we will need. But if we are honest, like Adam and Eve, many times, we want more; we want to be in charge. We are tempted by the forbidden fruit much as spoiled children would be."<sup>2</sup>

Last week we were reminded that "it is time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Christmas toward the deep wilderness of Lent. As gloomy as that may sound, it is very good news. Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures, and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness is just what we need.

No one can make you go, after all. But if you've been looking for some excuse to head to your own mountaintop and pray, this is it. If you've been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, look no further. This is your chance to enter the cloud of unknowing and listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you... this is your chance to encounter God's contagious glory, so that a little of that shining rubs off on you."

Perhaps because we truly spend very little time in the depths or in the wilderness we have lost the ability to see light and hope even in the best circumstances. It's not that I think you have not struggled. Let's face it life is hard. I know some of your stories and I know you have been to the depths, and you have journeyed in the wilderness. But I also think that sometimes we do make life harder than it needs to be by trying to be God, by trying to be in control of things that are not for us to control. When we do that it's easy to lose hope.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://day1.org/5635-who\\_is\\_in\\_charge](http://day1.org/5635-who_is_in_charge)

<sup>2</sup> IBID

When we place ourselves in the place of power and control and the world does not follow our way, we will find ourselves despairing and usually going in the wrong direction.

I recently read this reflection based on Psalm 119:59 by Kenneth L. Samuel

"I pondered the direction of my life, and I turned to follow your laws." - Psalm 119:59

I thought it might help remind us of why we set intention and focus in the season of lent. Samuel wrote "I've missed exits, missed streets and even practically missed appointments by not paying attention to the route as I was driving. Even with the GPS activated and the nice voice giving me directions, I've ended up on the wrong roads, because at points I thought were familiar, I decided to disregard the GPS and go my own way.

When I stop being distracted enough to really think about where I'm going and the direction I'm travelling, I do much better. Life is more than a journey. Life is a journey in the right direction.

Sometimes it takes detour signs and road blockages to get us to consider a different route. But I've discovered that you can travel the wrong road for a long, long time without even realizing that you are travelling farther and farther away from your desired destination. This is why living and moving without thinking and reflecting is so counter-productive.

The Psalmist didn't have to run off a cliff or face a negative impasse in order to recognize the need to make a critical turn in life. The GPS of the Psalmist's own conscientiousness urged: "Go a better way! Live a better life!" The turns in life that we willingly make out of conscientious self reflection are more valuable than the turns we are forced to make out of desperation.

Socrates said that "the unexamined life is not worth living." I'm no Socrates, but I'd like to add that life unexamined is frustratingly wasteful as well. I've got the experiences of wasted time, wasted resources, wasted energy and wasted opportunities to prove it.

This lent we have the opportunity as individuals to stop and refocus. To stop and take note of our direction. To ponder God's plan for us. This lent may we plant hope, one bulb, one moment, one circumstance at a time so that when we come to the joy of the resurrection story we are more alive, more well, and completely transformed by the hope, joy, grace and love we have found.

Amen.