

On readying the revolutionaries

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Matthew 4:1-11

I.

How do you think of God, feel God, sense God? Do you remember how very close God is? Do you smell God in the air, feel God in the wind, taste God in the sharing of bread? Do you know a spirit who is close by, in and through you, giving you life, moving your soul, calling you to love?

Many, many years ago, when the young man Jesus of Nazareth had been baptized and just begun his ministry, the Spirit let him know that there was no future to be proclaimed without a memory of the past. The Spirit let him know there was no kingdom to be had, without deep roots in the faith his ancestors had learned in the wilderness. So for forty days, reminiscent of the forty years of Moses' wandering in the wilderness, Jesus had to go out in the wilderness. He went out to remember who he was and whose he was, to fast, to pray.

In the wilderness Jesus found the resources to face temptation, the kind of temptation that filled that land then; that fills this land now. In the wild places outside of his civilized world, he found a generous God, able to provide for a people. In the desert places, he found the hand of One who could sustain him. He experienced the gracious power of a Spirit who would help him resist the natural tendency to power, influence, glory and allegiance, and most of all, to control! He encountered the ancient God whose presence had led his mothers and fathers into the land of promise. He met the presence of a still young God who cared enough to shelter him in the cold desert nights. As he walked through the hardship and confusion, it was enough to lean on the everlasting arms of that God, walk on the earth of that God, embrace the sky of that God. It was enough to trust a Spirit that was in the land.

This trust that he learned in forty days of wilderness wandering never deserted Jesus. It was the preparation he needed to face into controversy, into powerlessness and betrayal, even into death. It stood him in good stead, alone on mountaintops and surrounded by crowds, alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, and facing the mob and Roman authorities in Jerusalem. It stood him in good stead as he put forth a revolutionary message and began a revolutionary movement.

II

Let's admit that Jesus movement is a movement across history that continues to be domesticated and tamped down, emptied often of meaning and perennially dulled on its edges--. But then it will rise up again, as we hear afresh the call of Christ to a way of peace in the midst of war, the summons of Isaiah to justice instead of greed, the joyful faith of the young girl Mary in a coming day when the mighty will be brought down and the little people rise up to dignity and empowerment.

Throughout the centuries, the teachings of Jesus that we uncover in places like the Sermon on the Mount have inspired folk to walk a revolutionary path. Our bulletin today starts with a quotation from a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who refused to go along with the Third Reich. Often remembered as the pacifist who took part in a plot on Hitler's life, we forget the prior years he spent organizing a little group of protestant Christians who confessed simply that Christ was their Fuehrer. We forget that earlier, in the thirties, when he could have stayed in New York as a guest of his friends at Union Seminary, he went back to his beloved homeland to face the music of tyranny instead.

Hard times call us to tough faithfulness. In this day and this land, strident voices of hatred attempt personally to tear down our first African American president. An ugly and cynical spirit strives to return us to separation in our schools by race and wealth. Fear of the foreigner moves many to a renewed isolationism, and congressional hearings targeting American Muslims threaten to further fan the flames of religious prejudice and reaction. In this day two wars grind on while the rich get richer, and the poor continue to deal with chronic unemployment. In days like this, we all need to toughen up and get to work, with a different message of faithfulness, and revolutionary hope.

On this first Sunday in Lent, many of us are not sure what to do with the season. For others of us, it is a time of deep penitence. For others still, it is a time to learn, or re-learn, the basics of the walk of faith. But if we are followers of the Jesus who took to the wilderness for forty days, Lent of 2011 is a good season for the preparation of our characters, the seasoning of our souls for living in a world in which we are called to be out of step with the status quo.

Lent is a good season to commit afresh to live by a set of values and toward common ends not easily reconciled with much of what passes for wisdom. A remarkable follower of Jesus, that Catholic activist and saint Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, once said: "The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?"

As we listen in Matthew's gospel to Jesus wrestle with the temptations to use his power to fill himself rather than to trust in God's bread for the journey—surely we need to look at the places where we have put our own comfort food ahead of faithfulness to an occasionally dangerous cause. As we listen to Jesus respond simply and faithfully, as he is subjected to an offer to immense political religious and political power, if he will but sell his soul to the devil...well there are at least a few of us who know about that kind of temptation as well. Many have heard it from an employer once at least. It goes a little like this: "If you will just compromise your convictions about (you fill in the blank) you can move ahead with your career. But we need to know we can trust you. We need to know you are going to put the values of this organization first." What a lovely response we find in the words, once again, of Dorothy Day, who lived a life of voluntary poverty in solidarity with the homeless: "Our faith is stronger than death, our philosophy is firmer than flesh, and the spread of the Kingdom of God upon the earth is more sublime and more compelling."

III

Sisters and brothers, we live in a world that yet invites us to turn stones into bread to stuff our faces. Let us re-commit ourselves to the notion that the gospel of consumption is a temptation to abandon the simple path of sharing and trust to which Jesus calls us.

At least a few of us—religious leaders—live in a world where we are invited to stunts and showmanship, rather than service and faithful witness. The words of Jesus still ring uncomfortably somewhere down in us: "Again it is written, 'Do not put your Sovereign God to the test.'"

We all live in a world that worships power and that gives iconic status to the big names. We live in a world of empire and oppression. Let's not fool ourselves. The message is still there: "All these will I give you, if you fall down and worship me." Jesus' response is clear enough! Following his path is a revolutionary alternative, and surely not a comfortable one.

In what remains of the forty days of Lent, it is a good time once again to ready us highly imperfect and sometimes sluggish revolutionary. It is an inward process, a process of honesty about where one's life is compromised, and one's faith has become unrecognizable as a follower of Jesus—I mean the real Jesus who burst on the scene in Galilee all those years ago.

Each of us has a different path and calling: Yesterday our son Luke posted pictures on the internet for us to see—Chicago teachers have driven up to Wisconsin to stand with their colleagues in the state house there...including many student teachers who do not yet have jobs! Others of you will face other questions of conscience, other opportunities for faithfulness—perhaps a simple word of solidarity to a Muslim friend, or a decision to do something not to your own advantage, so someone else can get ahead. Call it training in Christianity, call it Lenten discipline, call it readying for a revolution.

Let's do what it takes to get there in preparing our souls! If that is a week of fasting, or some days in the mountains, let's go for it. If it is a day of quiet retreat with a dozen Binkley people, let's go. If it is cooking soup on a Wednesday afternoon with people you don't know well, start cookin'! If it is a field trip to Wisconsin, or to the School Board in Wake County, go for it. If it is a new discipline of reading and writing, just do it! Lent needs to come out of the mothballs, as a time for readying the revolutionaries. Prayerfully. Passionately. This movement is for real. Amen.