

## From What do We Need Release?

Beloved community, as we reflect on our scripture readings for this morning, we settle into sacred space and time during which we can each wonder: From what do I need release? As we enter the wilderness of our Lenten journey, the biblical texts for today offer us a two-fold invitation:

- To notice spaces in our lives where we are tempted to stagnate with inertia, maintaining a white-knuckled grip on the familiar, and stuck repeating our most worn out behaviors...
- And to notice openings in our lives where we might find release from the false comfort of inertia by acting in faith – trying out new, more lifegiving behaviors.

So I wonder: When did you last feel butterflies of anticipation in your gut, reminding you of your aliveness as you stretched to try something new, something healthy, something brave? Let us pray:

God of all and God of each of our particular journeys, be with us today as we dive into honest with ourselves and reflect on where those places are where the tempter (the power of fear) seeks to keep us away from release. But you are our release! And as we wonder together, grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, if we invite them in, both the Psalmists' proclamation and the narrative of Jesus wrestling with temptations offer insights that can speak to our experiences of the tension between inertia and release.

I first invite us, though, to have a sense of humor about ourselves and then to find a clarion call to this time of reflection about temptation toward inertia versus movement toward release.

Bill Watterson, American cartoonist and author of the comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes” once wrote the following (which I’ve altered for gender inclusivity):

*"Calvin: Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of [hu]man[s]?  
Hobbes: I'm not sure that [hu]man[s] need the help."*

God knows that we get worn out and easily slump into temptation, corruption and self-destruction. We see it in our own behavior. We see it in others’ behavior. Yet Love and forgiveness can keep us humble and teachable, which the Psalmist will invite us to ponder.

A powerful voice from the twentieth century, that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., once stated the following about temptation toward inertia versus faithful release – King wrote: *"If a man happens to be 36 years old, as I happen to be, and some great truth stands before the door of his life, some great opportunity to stand up for that which is right, and that which is just, and he refuses to stand up because he wants to live a little longer, and he is afraid his home will get bombed, or he's afraid that he will lose his job, or he is afraid that he will get shot, He may go on and live until he's 80, and the cessation of breathing in his life is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit."*

The Rev. Dr. King offers a challenging invitation – a clarion call – to awareness. How dead is your spirit? How inert and stagnant is your spirit in the ways of fear and false comfort?

Let's shift to unpacking the narrative of Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness before looking to the Psalm for encouragement.

To return to Hobbes' question, do I believe in the devil as "*a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of [hu]man[s]?*" No and yes. In my faith journey I have come to trust in God not as a supreme good being but as an energy of empowering love.

Similarly, I do not believe that the tempter is a supreme evil being; yet I am absolutely acquainted with the tempter as an energy of disempowering fear. These are my confessions of faith and fear. I encourage you to allow space for your own concepts of God and tempter that might be quite different from mine.

We heard: "*The tempter came and said to Jesus, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But Jesus answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'"*

Here, Jesus experienced the disempowering energy of fear pressing him to react in a knee-jerk way – to grab the low-hanging fruit of a quick fix to satisfy an immediate desire or need. Some of us have perhaps felt the true hunger pangs that come with fasting and can empathize with the temptation to reach for a quick fix. Yet Jesus models a way of sitting mindfully in the discomfort of physical hunger by choice, awaiting a word from the Love of God. **I wonder: In what habit or pattern in your life do you find that you too often react in a knee-jerk way – grabbing a quick fix? And what might help you in seeking healthy release from that temptation to react instead of mindfully responding to circumstances?**

We also heard in the gospel reading: *“Then the devil took Jesus 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, “God will command God’s 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 the devil, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.””*”

Here, Jesus experienced the disempowering energy of fear pressing him to act in grandiose and risky ways to prove that the power of his God would prove him right and invincible. I am reminded of Bob Dylan’s 1963 song, “With God On Our Side.” Yet Jesus models a way of sitting mindfully in the discomfort of a voice challenging his way of trusting God’s gently empowering presence. **Here I wonder: In what habit or pattern in your life do you find that you push and push the limits of your capacity or the patience of others, risking the destruction of relationship with yourself or with others? What might help you in seeking healthy release from that temptation to be reckless?**

We went on to hear finally from the gospel writer: *“The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and the devil said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to the devil, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.””*”

Here, Jesus experienced that disempowering energy of fear pressing him to idolize (devote himself) to false gods (things lesser than the Love of God). Yet Jesus again models a way of sitting mindfully in the discomfort of a voice pestering his spirit, distracting him from being anchored in the Love of God.

**I wonder: What habit or pattern in your life is receiving much more of attention than is healthy for you? Are you devoted to something not worthy of your devotion? What might help you in seeking healthy release from that temptation to devote yourself to that false idol?**

I mentioned earlier that Love and forgiveness can keep us humble and teachable.

Confession of sin (that is, our times of wandering that are fruitless at best and hurtful at words) – confession of sin is a refreshing, empowering practice in our Judeo-Christian faith heritage. Let's hear again the new lease on life that the Psalmist seems to experience through confession and forgiveness. We heard these to bits:

*"Happy [happy!] are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silent, my body wasted away... Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin."*

A singer songwriter friend of mine named Erika Lockett died a few years ago from cancer. She once wrote a song entitled, "Dust," which builds upon an understanding that our essence is dust – connected to all of creation. And any who want will be invited to the imposition of ashes after worship today. Here are a few lyrics that have served as a theme for me when I feel low on courage to resist and break free from temptations. It is about leaning toward the spacious embrace of Love that is more powerful than fear that is also present. I encourage you to close your eyes now if you are comfortable doing so and to hold your hands in an open posture on your lap to receive these words of encouragement.

Erika Lockett wrote:

It's like stepping off a hundred-foot pole  
It's like holding your breath, holding your breath  
Then letting go.  
It's like giving in to the bottom giving out  
It's like giving up, giving up  
Precious doubt.  
How does it feel skipping rope with your fears?  
Laughing as you fall  
Can you see it all intertwined,  
Tangled vines  
Twisted lines?  
We are handfuls of dust  
We are pieces of sky  
We are thundering silence answering why we are

Friends, when it comes to acknowledging and confronting your own temptations to lean into inertia and worn out patterns, are you holding your breath? Or might you be capable of skipping rope with your fears, even laughing as you fall?

Let us lean into living in the way of release, empowered by Love that is always stronger than fear. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Psalm 32:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11