

Sermon – Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-17

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Grace Lutheran Church

1 Lent – Year A

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“If You Are”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Erika’s absence from worship is not only fairly uncommon, it’s also not usually cause for joy. Today might be an exception. Today is one of those days where she might get the wrong idea that God approves of her ways. Her vegetarian ways, to be specific. Before their sin and subsequent fall from grace, it seems that Adam and Eve were vegetarians, God having given them freedom to eat all the fruit of the earth they could, save from one tree. It’s just the worst when Erika thinks she has the religious high ground! Truth be told, I not only respect her for her dietary choices, I’m healthier for them. While we do not live in a meat-free home, we eat less meat than we otherwise might, which is better for the world and better for us. But darn if it doesn’t make me miss what I don’t have. So it is that, when presented with the opportunity, I’m more than happy to grab a sausage biscuit from McDonald’s, or a beef from Johnnie’s, or BBQ from anywhere, or, well, you get the idea. I hunger for these meaty treats all the more because I don’t usually get to have them. But I’ll confess, since Erika’s not here to hear my confession, that the joy I find is fleeting. Don’t get me wrong; I feel no guilt over the occasional hamburger. But that’s how hunger works. No matter how much I eat, no matter how good it tastes, I’m going to get hungry again.
2. Hunger, in its many forms, is at the center of our readings on this First Sunday in Lent. On this day when our forty-day Lent has just begun, we find

Jesus at the end of his forty days of wilderness fasting. Jesus, fully human, feels the pangs of hunger in his gut. He is famished. At his weakest. It is precisely here that the devil comes to tempt him. Jesus, like the rest of us, would have a hankering for that which he hadn't had in a while. But the devil's handiwork here is subtle and surprising. He doesn't use Jesus' hunger to get Jesus to eat something or do he shouldn't. He uses Jesus' hunger to tempt Jesus to *be* something, someone, he isn't. At least, that's what the devil tries to do. "If you are the Son of God," Satan begins. *If*. Aren't you? That's you, right? God's Son? The same Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness was present when God's voice broke through the heavens over the Jordan and announced that Jesus was God's Son. *If you are?* Is Jesus hungering to be something more? Does he feel the need to prove, rather than receive, his identity? That's what Satan wants to know.

3. It's the same scene that Satan enacted in the Garden long ago, if one is willing to assume that the devil is in the serpent. The serpent goes after those who hunger, too, but there are no empty bellies here. Adam and Eve might not have access to Johnnie's beef, but they have everything else they want. Still, they hunger, unwilling to be who they were made to be. The author of Genesis lays out the purpose of creation and the place of humanity within it: Creation is meant to grow and thrive, and humans are meant to till, keep, and serve God's creation. They, we, have all they need, yet they hunger for more. They yearn to be masters of the knowledge of good and evil, arbiters of what is right and wrong for their lives. To be clear, Adam and Eve were moral beings before they ate the forbidden fruit. Right and wrong were clear. It was right to assist God is God's project of caring for creation; it was wrong to eat from the one tree of which they were not supposed to eat. Adam and Eve already know right from wrong; the fruit of the tree was about them determining such things for themselves rather than trusting in the God who wanted nothing more than to simply provide for them. Would they be content to remain children of God, or would they hunger to become as gods,

those meting out good – and more often evil – upon others? Sadly, clearly, it was the latter. And as for them, so for us. We disregard the blessed identities God has crafted for us, exchanging them for the cheap veneer of choice, the lie of self-determination. As was asked in our Cornerstones Bible study this week, “Why didn’t they just do what they knew they were supposed to do?” Indeed. Why not? And why don’t we? Because the hunger in our bones is to be like God, never mind that we have stilled instead of tilled God’s creation; that we have unleashed violence and hatred and war – war in this week when we mark the unholy and wholly unnecessary destruction which Russia has unleashed upon Ukraine. Yes, we humans know what is right and what is wrong, but in seeking to become gods, we call the good evil and the evil good. This is where we find ourselves, ensnared not by God but by our own willful insistence on knowing what’s best in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

4. Jesus enters into our hunger. Mark Bangert, recently deceased pastor and professor, known and loved by many at Grace, writes: “That Jesus was famished taxed his concentration; the tempter knew (his) vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, the testing was not about appetites or hungers. Sonship was at stake here. The Spirit wanted to know whether Jesus was up to taking on the seemingly impossible role of being the faithful Son.” If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread and feed this hungry world. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and let the angels bear you up. If you but worship me, I’ll give you the kingdoms of the world. The *if* has no power over Jesus, for he does what we do not. He trusts unfailingly in the God who gives him his Sonship. Jesus will trust God’s Word alone. Jesus will not test God. Jesus will worship God. He undoes the sin of the garden, the one human overturning the damage done by the one person and by every person. And in the end, he will upend the temptations, allowing himself – not stones – to become bread to feed the world. Allowing himself to be cast into death that others may live. Allowing himself to be taken high up, not in glory to receive

the kingdoms of this world, but upon a cross to overcome them and inaugurate the new Kingdom of God.

5. Lent may be a time for self-improvement, but the discipline of this season is first a time to focus on Christ, and what he has done for us. To see where our self-centeredness has led us, to see his God-centeredness, and to renew the long baptismal obedience of Christ-centered living. Even Christ who *is* God did not grasp or claim equality with God. He trusted in God's Word. Will we? Will we, at the end of our sinful selfishness, discover the freeing joy of being *not* God? The joy of being the people God has created us, the people that Jesus has saved us to be, the people the Spirit has indwelt us to be.

6. Friends, we are hungry. In our hunger, we consume so much that does not satisfy, so much that consumes us. Today, see the One who satisfies. The Christ who satisfies the law and the prophets when we could not. The One who stands up to and stares down the evil one, when we could not. The One who quiets forever the Adam or Eve inside each of us, creating instead a new you. This Jesus is the one human who has undone every human's sin. Even yours, whatever it may be. All that it may be. There is nothing else that will satisfy you, in this world or into the next. But there is also no need to be hungry. You are a child of the most high God, created and redeemed to love God and serve God within this good creation, knowing that your place in the Kingdom is secure. Christ feeds you. Watches over you. Suffers and dies for you. For his sake God forgives you. All so that you may be who God wanted you to be to begin with. A child who trusts in the Lord, who receives yourself as a gift of new life from God, prepared for the new paradise that is to come.
Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.