

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

First Sunday in Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 1, 2020

Jesus Says “No” to Earthly Glory

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson for this First Sunday in Lent consists of selections from the account of the creation and fall of the first human beings. They choose to follow the advice of the tempter. Listen to these words from Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson is very appropriate for a season of almsgiving, prayer, fasting, and repentance. Unlike the man and woman in the Genesis Lesson, Jesus will say “no” to the Tempter. Listen to these words from Matthew 4:1-11...

Sermon

Do any of you remember playing that childhood game called “King of the Mountain?” We played it when I was growing up in Jackson, Mississippi. The object of the game was to scramble to the top of a hill, a mound of dirt, or snow, or whatever. When you got to the top you would yell, “King of the Mountain!” Of course, it wasn’t always possible to reign as “King” for very long, since other kids were continually trying to take over that top position.

It was a pretty rough game, involving a fair amount of pulling and pushing. You might go home to supper with a scraped arm, a bruised knee, or worst of all—a torn shirt. Even if you weren’t all that successful at playing “King of the Mountain,” it was fun trying to climb the hill, and there was a tremendous sense of accomplishment in reaching the top spot. Somehow it made all the scrambling and sliding worthwhile—to rule over that “mountain,” if only for a few moments.

Of course, adults don't play "King of the Mountain"—at least not in the same way. But some of us spend a great deal of our energy in climbing one mountain or another.

Now, this sermon is not an attack on striving for success but a warning about putting success first and foremost above everything else in our lives. In our careers, we may be in the position of trying constantly to prove ourselves to co-workers and superiors, so that we may be considered worthy. We're not climbing a mountain; we're climbing a career ladder. Many ministers' careers begin with the goal of ultimately having a "tall steeple" church. In the pressure of the job market, and in their own desire for security and status, people may from time to time find themselves leaving significant others by the wayside as they climb their ladder. Many have found that their families, their health, and their spiritual lives have suffered in that climb to success, as the long hours, the travel, and the frequent preoccupation with work begin to wear away. We may have found ourselves asking more than once whether this game of "King of the Mountain" is worth the price we have to pay.

Some professional athletes live in a "King of the Mountain" world. In the NFL the team provides food, clothing, and transportation for players virtually all year long. A "player development" employee takes care of any off-the field issues. Legal disputes, child-support payments, speeding tickets, car insurance are all taken care of. But this bubble does not prepare them for life after they leave their sport. Having never been given the opportunity to learn the lessons that most adults learn, professional athletes often fall on their faces when there isn't anyone there to catch them...or as we might say, when they are no longer "King of the Mountain."

Some of us may be tempted into playing "King of the Mountain" in our personal lives, when the goal of being "on top of everything" assumes a high priority. We may fall into the trap

of thinking that we must manage every aspect of our lives just so—be the perfect parent, the perfect spouse, the perfect son or daughter, the perfect friend. We watch our weight, keep our wardrobes fashionable, join the right groups. We strive to maintain a positive outlook and never trouble anyone with our problems.

Of course, there is something good about having a positive sense of direction. But the problem comes when circumstances make it impossible for us to be entirely in control, when we fall from that precarious perch on the crest—and maybe feel ourselves, in the words of Paul Simon, “slip slidin’ away—you know the nearer your destination, the more you’re slip slidin’ away.”

It’s hard to ask for help when the “King of the Mountain” faces financial trouble, divorce, death, drug addiction, or depression. It can be difficult to admit brokenness, so tempting to pretend that we don’t need any help—from God, or from any person.

When we are caught in the scramble of this onward and upwards contest, it may be helpful to remember our Lord’s response when faced with the temptations of success and control. Jesus could have gone about his ministry in quite a different way than he chose. He could have presented himself to the people as a model of success and power—and he would have received lots of encouragement. He could have played the flashy leader, relying upon miracles to prove his authority—turning stones to bread—after all that would have fed hungry people. Jesus could have opted to appear as one who was calling all the shots, totally in control; throwing himself dramatically off the temple tower and daring God not to save him—after all, he was God’s Son, wasn’t he? He could have commanded all the wealth and political power of all the kingdoms of the world, if he would only fall down and worship Satan—after all, he could use that power for good, couldn’t he?

Yet this was not the way of Christ. He had not come to rule the world, but to save the world; not to be served, but to serve. Paul says in his letter to the church in Philippi that Jesus:

Who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

Yes, Jesus made the conscious choice *not* to play King of the Mountain. Instead, he chose to be King of the Valley—one who walked and ate and lodged with those who had fallen, or been kicked to the bottom of the hill. The mountain Jesus did climb was a hill called Golgotha, where he was crucified as a common criminal. Through the Cross came the Crown that Christ would wear in the Kingdom of God.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2;6-11)

Last Sunday in the Church Calendar was the day of The Transfiguration. Immediately after that glorious experience, Jesus went down from the mountain of glory into the valley of suffering. First thing, he met an epileptic boy and his pleading father. Because of their lack of faith, the disciples could not help. Jesus commanded that the boy be brought to him and he healed him. Jesus said that faith, even as small as a mustard seed, can move mountains.

You know, it's easy to feel Christ-like in worship, in prayer and in reading scripture. But being Christ-like means not only engaging in worship, prayer, and Bible study, it also means rising from our knees before God and going out and addressing the problems of humankind. Real Christianity draws strength from God, and from that strength reaches out to others. Real Christianity involves meeting God in the secret place and then meeting people in the marketplace, in the school, or in the hospital or nursing home, or in the valley of the shadow of death.

There's an old Jewish folktale about a widow whose son who died in a tragic accident.

The woman, crazy with grief, mourned her loss so deeply that no one could provide her comfort. At last a friend took her to the house of a holy man where she made a sobbing plea. "Sir, please use your powers to bring my son back to life. Surely you are able by prayer or some magic to induce the Almighty to lighten my grief."

The old man spoke kindly to the woman. "Bring me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. I will use that seed to remove the pain from your life.

Immediately the woman set out in search of the magic mustard seed. "First I will visit the home of a wealthy family," she thought. "Tragedy is less likely to strike them." Soon she approached a beautiful mansion, knocked on the door, and spoke to the woman who greeted her. "I am in search of a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? Please, it is vital that I know."

"Never known sorrow!" cried the woman who had answered the door. "You have come to the wrong house." As she sobbed, she began to describe all of the tragedies that had touched her family. She invited the widow into her home to explain in greater detail what had taken place. The widow remained in that home for many days, listening and caring.

When she left to resume her search, the widow visited a modest home about a mile away. The experience was the same. And wherever she traveled, from mansion to hut, she was greeted with tales of sadness and sorrow. Everyone found her a willing and careful listener.

After months of travel, she became so involved with the grief of others that she forgot about her search for the magic mustard seed, never realizing that it had indeed driven the sorrow from her life.

My friends, God does not expect us to always be on top of things, even though we may expect this of ourselves or of others. Christ meets us wherever we are on life's journey, and sometimes he seems closest when we have lost our footing and incurred scrapes and bruises. He

is the Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost, who stoops to wash our feet, to bind up our wounds. And he wants us to be “our brother’s keeper.” To weep with those who weep. To taste the salt of their tears.

Our Lord is the One who overcame temptation—he is the author of new beginnings for those who have fallen. Jesus is King of the Valley and therefore for us, the King of Kings.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.