

Matthew 4:1-11
March 5, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This past Wednesday the church gathered together for what we know as Ash Wednesday. It is the start to the church's 40 days of Lent. A time of baptismal reflection. A time of penance; that is, repentance or acknowledgement of our sinful nature and our great need for God's forgiveness. A time to truly focus on the fact we are human. We are mortal. We are frail. We are solely dependent upon God to save us. In the face of all that tempts to turn us from God, to place our trust in the kingdoms of the world, this season is one in which the Spirit leads us to remember the fact we are human and part of the hunger that lies in each and every one of us is that which only the One who created us can fill.

On Ash Wednesday, we gathered together. Not just as the people of Bethany Lutheran. But also as the people of West Branch United Methodist and Springdale United Methodist. Last week in our annual pulpit exchange we gathered together with our brothers and sisters of the two Friends congregations in town and also with our brothers and sisters of St. Bernadette's. Both of which, I believe, reveal another fact of what it means to be human and of what it means

to be part of the church on earth. That we were not created and do not exist to be independent beings. We were created to be in relationship with one another just as God created Eve to be a partner to Adam. Yes, we God created Bethany Lutheran church to be part of God's mission in the world. But God also created the larger church, to which Jesus Christ is the head, and we are joined to that church. That is part of our baptismal reflection this season – remembering that we are united in Christ and to be united in Christ is to be joined to the body of Christ, which is his church on earth.

And we were created to be in relationship with our Creator. God created us out God's goodness and God's love and as such God promises God's people time and time again life in human flesh means seeking God in all circumstances and trusting confidently God will meet our needs and care for us as a loving parent cares for their child. Because that is what we are. This, too, is part of our baptismal reflection during this season. To hear those same words Jesus did in his own baptism, just prior to his being led into the wilderness in today's gospel. Word of promise. Words of purpose. Words of identity. Words of compassion. "We are God's beloved children." Those words are the very word of God, which feed us in our own 40 day journey to the cross. God's word is a nourishing morsel that sustains us in our own wilderness wanderings. It is God's word that is a

healing balm which comes to us and sets us free from the sin that binds us. Words of forgiveness that brought joy to the psalmist in today's Psalm. While translated as "happy" it is much more a state of "joyfulness" and "contentment" because of what God has done. As the psalter confesses his iniquities he states it is God alone who covers his sin. God alones blots it out. God alone brings him joy and contentment. God alone gives him a fresh start. But then notice at the ending. He doesn't rejoice and give thanks as a result of God's grace alone but rather he calls the people to a communal act of worship as together they lift up shouts of joy.

It is God's word that continues to be the healing balm for us each and every time we gather together and confess the very fact of what it means to be human. That we are mortal. We have sinned. We have turned from God. We have given in to temptation and sought first our own needs often at the expense of our neighbor. But that word of God continues to live. Continues to speak. Hear those words once again, "In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us and for his sake God forgives us all our sins." They are the words we will shortly in the great supper our Lord instituted on the night before his death. Words of remembrance. Words of promise. Words of hope. Words of assurance that he is with us.

We are human. The ashes on Wednesday reminded us of that. This season of Lent calls us to reflect on what that means. And while today's gospel passage can be and has been interpreted in many ways perhaps the Christological thrust of this passage is to lift up the fact Jesus was human. Yes, fully divine and fully God but also fully human. Jesus experienced wilderness wanderings just as the Israelites did for 40 years prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. Jesus fasted in the desert just as the prophet Elijah fasted 40 days in the desert did before receiving a new commission from God. Or just as Moses fasted on Mount Sinai as he inscribed the words of God's covenant for Israel. Jesus remained in the wilderness for 40 days waiting for what comes next in his mission just as Noah did for those 40 days in the ark. God in Jesus takes upon humanity in every conceivable way.

Notice the devil's first temptation to Jesus. He already knows who Jesus is. It is often translated, "if you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread"; however, it could also be translated, "since you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. We see this in many of the scenes in which Jesus encounters demoniacs. These demons know exactly who Jesus is and the power he has over the evil forces of the world. So, too, here. The devil knows Jesus is the Son of God and challenges Jesus to use

that power to save himself. But notice Jesus' response. He uses the word of God from Deuteronomy in saying, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." One is a bit broad and doesn't carry the thrust of this word. The King James and NIV translations use the word, "Man" or rightly could be translated, "Human being." While Son of God is an important Christological title for Matthew, perhaps "Jesus here insists on his own humanity by juxtaposing 'human being' to the devil's 'Son of God.'"ⁱ To be human, as Jesus is, does indeed bring physical hunger and the need for bread just as Jesus finds himself famished in the wilderness after 40 days. However, first and foremost, being human means being fed with word of God. Jesus, in his humanity, confidently trusts in the relationship he has with his Father and will not let the tempter thwart that relationship.

Jesus was ushering in a new kingdom. God's kingdom. A kingdom drastically different than kingdoms or empires of the world. During Jesus' and Matthew's time that kingdom was the Roman Empire. One marked by power and wealth. One marked by domination and oppression of those who chose to defy it just as Jesus will live out on the cross. But humanity in its fullness is one in which we are ultimately weak and solely dependent upon God. It is one in which we are devoid of miraculous power to turn stones into bread and save ourselves. It is

one in which too often humans find themselves the victim of sin and powers of the world. And in this passage “Matthew present Jesus from the Christological perspective that pictures his earthly life as that of one who fully shares the weakness of our human situation.”ⁱⁱ We have a portrait of Jesus, fresh out of the waters of baptism and living into the words of God that said, “This is my beloved God, with whom I am well pleased” and part of that portrait is that being a “child of God” means to have a trusting relationship to God that does not ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life. The good news in this passage is exactly that. We have a God who in Jesus Christ is so vastly different than any gods of the world. We have a God who physically comes to life. A God who knows what it means to be human. A God who goes with us into the wilderness. A God who will reveal power comes in weakness and through that weakness will reveal God’s power to conquer the devil, sin, and death. A God of salvation.

ⁱ *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII*; Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 164.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 165.