March 1st, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

1st Sunday of Lent

10:30am

Testing and Temptations

I. Let’s talk about the devil

 This past Wednesday at our Ash Wednesday service, I preached about Lent calling us into the most difficult of texts and trying to reconcile those stories in our lives. I preached about how it was challenging and hard and not necessarily pretty. So, this Sunday, instead of paddling into the shallow water, we’re jumping straight into the deep end. Let’s talk about the devil.

 In my experience as a Presbyterian, I cannot often recall lessons about the devil, which in some sense, I appreciate. As a young person, I was continually reminded again and again about the love of God and the devil and any of that discussion was uncomfortable and pushed to the side. That love has served me well throughout the years, but I wonder if never talking about the devil really served me well either.

 What do you think about when you think about the devil? For me, I think about this red figure with a pitchfork, horns, red tights, and a poinyt tail – virtually anything you can conjure up at a Party City Halloween sale. And really, no where in the Bible is there a descriptor that gets close to that image, in fact, C.S. Lewis, a well known writer in the Christian world, said that this view of the devil really did us a disservice – it made us believe there was no evil or devil in the world. And the film, *The Usual Suspects*, reflects this idea, with the great quote, “The greatest trick the devil ever played was to make the world believe he does not exist.”

 So, here we are, right in the Gospel of Matthew, where we are being told that the devil and Jesus are having a face-off power play in the wilderness. And, it’s good debate team material – they both know the Scriptures, for the devil, or satan, was thought to be a great angel gone rogue. The devil pushes with tests and temptations, but we know the story, we know the end game, Jesus will not have the wool pulled over his eyes.

II. What’s so tempting?

 In brief, Jesus gets three different requests: to have a presto-chango moment to turn stones into bread, another to throw himself off the holy city’s temple and save himself, and then if Jesus promises to worship the devil, he gets all of these kingdoms. Jesus knows these are all falsehoods, but to be fair, the temptations are real and the payoff seems pretty sweet – such as all those kingdoms.

 What I love most about this passage is at the end of the temptations, Jesus says, “Away with you, Satan” or in my own vernacular, “Go away. Knock it off. Stop it.” And that is part of our Lenten practice – where when those temptations or tests of any kind come up, we put our hands up and say it, “Stop it. Enough.”

III. Spirit Side-bar

 Now, I need to add a sidebar to reading this morning, because the first line of the Scripture really bothers me, or at least it did at first. We hear this, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” At first, I thought – that’s really not cool – I love the Spirit, why would the Spirit bring Jesus right up into the wilderness. Any of my prayers around the Spirit are often for protection or comfort or peace – and here’s the Spirit leading Jesus right into the devil’s hand. Why would you do that, Spirit? I thought you were on our side, Jesus’ side, shouldn’t you be protecting him from the wilderness experience?

 And then I had to sit down and manage my own push-and-pull with the Spirit through the years. The Spirit has led me into some difficult spaces – spaces of challenging conversation, temptations, tests – but my reminder has been that the Spirit never really left me up there alone in the wilderness. I might have been led there, but the Spirit didn’t leave me, the Spirit sustained me, and I think and I hope, while it isn’t explicitly said, the Spirit was right there in the wilderness alongside Jesus, offering a sacred and holy presence in the midst of the battle.

III. When the Spirit is by our side

 I try to remember that the Spirit is by my side, and by Jesus’ side, as all the temptations and tests are going on, whether that’s Jesus’ experience in the wilderness or our own wilderness experiences. I think we experience the devil in modern ways in our own every lives – whether that’s the force of evil in the human world, whether that’s the shadow side of our own being and the shame that comes into our mind. The devil is anything that deconstructs or differs from the profound reality of love that comes from God.

 When I look at the devil in this way, I see the devil all over and as Christians, we have our own tests daily putting God’s words before the accuser. When the forces of this world say that some humans are less than others – where children are in cages, when we allow poverty to occur and turn our eyes, when we let evil rule – that’s the devil at play. That’s who we are trying to combat as we work for the Kingdom in this world.

 When I look at the shadow side of all of us, and you know it – it exists for even the most holy of us – when what I hear does not align with what God says about you and me – I know it’s evil. When I tell myself I’m not good enough, when I think that I don’t deserve this or that, or anytime I sell myself short – that’s the devil, that’s evil at play, convincing me that I am not the child of God that I profess aloud. For many of us, we fight this daily, or weekly, or in those moments before we drift off to sleep – none of us are free from that shadow, but the Spirit continues to combat the devil to say – you are worthy, you are loved, and anything or anyone who tells you differently is wrong.

 I think this is especially challenging in the ‘hustle’ culture of our world, and I would say, America, in particular. You hear your employers, the news, social media – you can’t escape it – go faster, get things done, and busyness is an accomplishment. Produce more, achieve more, perfect more – and anything less is unacceptable. If you look around the world, you find countries that socially practice less of a hustle culture, and naturally, you find healthier, whole, happier people. The land of the free and the brave is also the land that doesn’t want you to get a healthy eight hours of sleep a night. I believe hustle culture is one of the devil’s favorite games – because it provides us less space to think about God and more space to hyper-critically focus on perfecting and falling short.

IV. Where’s the good news?

 You might be wondering, after a nice sermon about the devil, where I can tell you the good news – and here it is – you also have the right and encouragement to say the same thing that Jesus said to Satan. Maybe don’t yell out at Martin’s – ‘Away with you, Satan’ or if you do, don’t tell them you learned that in Springfield, I don’t want those letters in my inbox – but maybe each day there’s an invitation when those pressures and temptations and idolizations come to mind that you get to say, “Enough. Enough.” Enough – because those things take away from the love and relationship I have with God.

 And when you say ‘Enough’ to hustle culture and to those temptations that poke at you every day, may you remember that the Spirit may have called you into challenging circumstances for your growth. But may you also remember that the Spirit stands alongside you, covers you, nourishes you, provides for you – so that you are not alone in the struggle.

 I’m not sure if you are giving up or taking up something for Lent, but it might be worthwhile in this time where we are called to slow down, to actually slow down. See what happens when you name hustle culture for what it is, see what happens when you claim anything that dehumanizes you or others as evil – see how that changes your heart. And soon enough, as your heart is changed, your actions will be as well. Amen.