

WALKING WITH GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

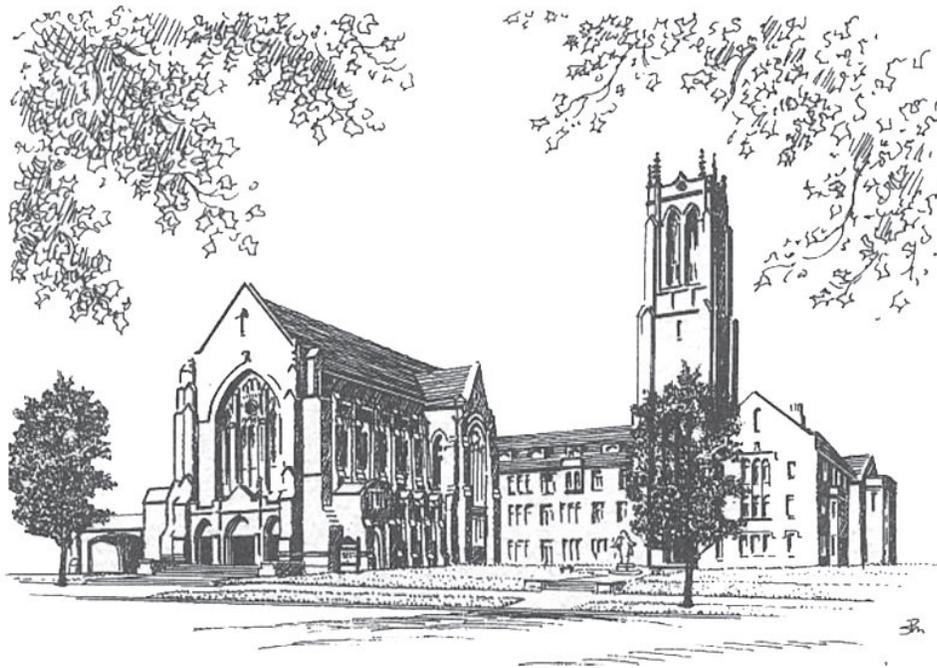
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

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First Sunday of Lent

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 • Psalm 32 • Romans 5:12-19 • Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Psalm 32

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 silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

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. Selah

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Romans 5:12-19

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned — sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him 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, 'He will command his 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 him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The neighborhood of my earliest years was a grand playground. The streets were hilly and flat, curving and winding, bumpy and smooth. There was always something around each turn that was a fresh challenge for me on my bike. Neighborhood friends and I would ride those bikes all over that area.

From the beginning, my parents made it clear what there was to enjoy and where the boundaries were. Boundaries that I understood later were for my own safety.

You can ride to the donut store and back, you can ride to Brent's house and Katie's. You can even go over the hill on Woodlark Street. There is a grassy hill near that donut shop, and you can park your bikes and play on that hill. You can even go in Grandy's Chicken and buy a Coke. Just don't cross Old Jacksonville Highway.

This highway was too busy for a 7,8,9 year old kid to be riding his bicycle. We enjoyed that whole neighborhood, but the boundary was so intriguing that we would ride up to it and look across the Old Jacksonville Highway at the Corner Market store.

Never mind the donut shop, Grandy's, or the Grassy Hill. After a while all we wanted to do was to cross that forbidden highway because in that Corner Market store was Big League Chew. Remember Big League chewing gum?

We had this huge neighborhood, and we enjoyed it. But man, if only we could cross over for that Big League Chew.

This is a playful example. The stakes weren't very high unless we were to cross that highway and get hit by a car or worse.

But it is from childhood a truth that plays out in each of our lives every single day whether we are 8 or 80 years old. The stakes get higher and higher.

It is as old as the Garden of Eden. It is as old as the wilderness experience we read about with Jesus.

These two examples provide two ways these things can go. Tempted toward the power and control promised by the serpent or the trust in God that comes from Jesus.

God has granted humans the gift of freedom — to choose to love and follow God. But with that freedom comes the possibility of choosing evil over good.

Having this freedom power, evil is chosen over good, and sin enters into the world bringing pain of every kind.

The Genesis story is the Judeo-Christian creation story that seeks to understand how things became the way they are.

Now there are two culprits for evil here in the story.

One is the serpent who most early Christians interpreted as Satan. He shows up in the wilderness with Jesus. The serpent uses half-truths to distort the whole truth — the serpent is right that their eyes will be opened and they will gain knowledge. But what they lost is so much larger — their innocence, their unobstructed relationship with God.

The devil was right about Jesus' relationship with God as the long-awaited Beloved Son but was wrong about the nature of the power that Jesus would experience. Rather than dominating people, Jesus loved and healed and ultimately gave away his power in order for God's supreme love to be seen in sacrifice.

The second culprit for evil is of course Eve and Adam. They could always say no to the serpent but didn't.

For the majority of us, sin tends to be more nuanced than overt struggles or at least starts out that way. For most of us here, if someone popped up wearing a red suit with a pointy tale carrying a pitchfork, we'd run the other direction.

It is exactly the whisper of the serpent and the voice in the wilderness tempting Jesus toward more more more that sways us.

Sin tends to be subtle in our lives. When asked once how you recognize it, George McDonald once said: "the devil tells me exactly what I most want to hear, that I belong to myself."

You may have heard the story about the Episcopal priest who went to the Harley Davidson dealer to buy a motorcycle. The salesman came out to the parking lot, noticed the man admiring the bike, and said: "that there bike is the most powerful piece of machinery you'll ever be seen on. It goes from zero to 60 in 5.8 seconds.

Jet black fuel tank, chrome muffler, raised handle-bars. Can't you see yourself, flying down the road, hair on fire, every one's head turning as you go by?"

"What sort of work do you do?" the salesman asked.

"I'm an Episcopal priest."

"Ah, this here motorcycle is the safest, most practical bike we've got on the lot. It comes with two helmets and free riding instructions."

How does temptation work in our lives?

It tells us exactly what we want to hear.

"You are powerful. You can control this. You don't need God."

What Jesus is illustrating here is freedom — freedom from the desire to be in control of everything, freedom from power of lording something over people, freedom from thinking you need to be God.

Jesus chooses trust, and in so doing illustrates a different kind of power in the wilderness. Trust in God.

Our trusting God means embracing restraints, not resisting them. It means embracing disciplines rather than breaking them. It means surrendering our lives, our plans, our hopes, our dreams to God.

The Lenten season is a time for us to order our lives around the Gospel story. It is the antidote to Eden's fall, if you will.

And since the fourth century, Christians have set aside the 40 week days before Easter as a time for repentance, reflection, and self-examination to do just that — to work with God for the repair of our lives.

In the scope of things, it's a long season. If we engage it deeply, it requires us to face our mortality, how we've ordered our lives, what control we hold on to, what to let go of.

It requires us to live deeply in the present.

At Lent this year I'm reminded of a favorite poem that helps me do that, by Jane Kenyon called "Otherwise."

Otherwise

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

— *Jane Kenyon*

This little poem begins with gratitude for the simplest gifts of everyday life — food, work, sleep, relationship, and even the family dog — and hints towards life's fragility: *it could have been otherwise.*

And then it winds toward the truth about life that we face at Lent, that one day, this life will end. Indeed, Kenyon herself died of leukemia at the age of 47.

You would think then that the tendency for someone like the poet or another one so aware of the fragility of their lives would be to rush on and cram everything in that you can to this life because, you know, it's fleeting. Neither the poem here nor the scripture hints toward that kind of living.

The wisdom of the Lenten season strangely asks otherwise: When you walk in the wilderness or in the Eden playgrounds of your life, walk with God. In the ordinariness of it, in the temptations, in the good and bad.

I am not a NASCAR watcher, but I was taken by this little quote I read from Richard Petty of NASCAR fame who put it well when he said, "One of the first things my father said when I started racing was, 'Win the race as slow as you can.'"

By that I take it to mean pace yourself, embrace disciplines, not in a frenetic harried way but in a deliberate, gracious way, and in this you hold on to a kind of spiritual freedom to thrive in this life.

It is the kind of spiritual freedom that we see in Jesus, who drew patiently from the well of his faith with the scriptures he cited and who answered each temptation with deep faithfulness.

This Jesus walks with us in the wilderness of our own lives and sets the pace for us this Lenten season. Thanks be to God.