

Gospel - Matthew 4: 1-11

First Sunday in Lent

St. David's Day



Sermon 3.1.20

Patti Case

This week's lessons are classic: Adam and Eve, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Black and white, good and evil. Yet is life ever quite that straightforward?

Yesterday, I laid in bed, long after I should have been up and about. I lay there and watched the trees dance in the wind. I saw the contrast between the graceful madrones, bending, in the distance, and the herky-jerky movements of the Douglas-fir branches up close. I finally rose, because, let's face it: being in bed at 7:45 am, even on a Saturday? It's just slothful in my book.

I am not Jewish, I am not Catholic, but I can do guilt with the best of them.

Was I really lying about, succumbing to the temptation of the devil? Or should I have laid there some more, allowing myself the opportunity to watch as the wind calmed, observing yet another of God's miracles?

Well, to tell you the truth, I was thinking about the needles. Counting the needles on a mature Douglas-fir tree is akin to counting the stars in the sky. I know that a Douglas-fir holds its needles for four to five years, and every time the wind blows, our driveway, our walkway, our everything is covered with Douglas-fir needles that we track into our house.

Dear Lord, please help my mind to stop at the branches dancing. Help me to stay away from the plight of the needles.

This temptation stuff is hard in real life, harder than it seems in the Bible.

Or is it difficult? The devil in our gospel story is clever, he knows all about Jesus' skill set and he plays on that. You know how to create food! Feed yourself! Leap from the temple, you know you can survive it and think of all those who will believe in you! And I will give you all this splendor if you will just worship me!

Jesus' answers seem so profound, and yet I can see he's doing what any good media relations person would do. He goes back to the lowest common denominator, the very basics, in his answers to the devil. In short, he answers the questions he wished the devil had asked. His foundation is the Bible, his answers are direct. Cold, hungry, so hungry he's probably hallucinating, tired from his time in the wilderness, he might easily have succumbed, but he had his bedrock answers in his quiver – and the devil couldn't stand up to that. "It is written," he said. Nothing new here, boys and girls, just the same good versus evil, evil wins story.

So. Back to the needles. I pledged that I would watch nature when I first awoke yesterday. It's part of my Lenten promise this year. I've decided to "do the little things," as our own St. David admonishes. Not stress and obsess about the little things, DO the little things. I don't have a lot of time, but I can stop and do one little thing each day. One act of kindness, one prayer for a fellow human, one new way of opening myself to Jesus. I figure if I live an average female lifespan, I have the opportunity to do 8,395 little things between now and the time I meet my Savior. That's probably better than counting the fir needles on the walkway. The devil was on duty yesterday morning, getting me all worked up about fir needles when I was supposed to be watching nature. He knows me, he knows my tendency to obsess about those little things.

Last week I was in Jackson, Mississippi. Despite being bogged down by a cold, despite the frigid wind and the unfamiliar downtown, despite the dozen things waiting for me on my computer, I walked the five or six blocks to St. Andrew's where I celebrated Ash Wednesday. It was my first day of "doing the little things." St. Andrew's was built in 1869 right

across from the Governor's mansion, after the first Episcopal Church in Jackson was burned by Union soldiers in 1863. Even while the city burned, parishioners convinced General Sherman to feed starving city residents. What a storied history! Do you think those parishioners believed they were doing big things? No, they probably told themselves they needed to do one little thing to save their war-torn city residents. Do the little things. And so, they brought joy to some of Jackson's survivors.

Today, the Very Reverend Anne Maxwell presides at St. Andrew's, along with the Reverend Jennifer Deaton and the Reverend Katie Bradshaw. Pastor Anne spoke of Lent as a joyful time, and it immediately occurred to me that her theme fit well with St. David's – be joyful, do the little things. But, really, joy? In Lent? Isn't that supposed to be all about fasting and restraint, giving things up and asking for forgiveness?

In Lent, we wash ourselves clean, Pastor Anne explained. And as I washed my face clean that night, scrubbing off the ashen cross on my forehead, I considered what an apt description she had provided. I am washed clean. Every day, every hour, every moment. Every time I transgress, even in those confused early morning moments when I'm not sure whether I'm transgressing. That is truly a joyful notion.

So really, this temptation thing is not so difficult. Not so long as I try to get it right. As our psalm today tells us:

**Great are the tribulations of the wicked; *
but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.**

**Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD; *
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.**

Be joyful, do the little things. Happy St. David's Day. And consider having a joyful Lenten season, getting down to those little things. Amen.