

“No Place to Hide”

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

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Do you remember the last Winter Olympics? The French figure skating judge caused a world wide outrage by scoring the Russian pair skaters ahead of the Canadian couple when it was clear to everyone that the Canadians were better. Judge Marie-Reine Le Gougne admitted being pressured to give lower scores to the Canadian skaters, and the evidence was strong enough against her that the IOC granted the Canadians a gold medal along with the Russians.

I believe the word they used to describe her was fragile. The head of the French Olympic team said, “Marie-Reine cracked and was under extremely negative influence for several days, and this person, normally solid, was emotionally destroyed. I am convinced that things have been done to her in the days leading to the pairs competition.”

Things have been done to her. How is it that someone entrusted with so much responsibility could be so easily compromised? How had she reached the pinnacle of a judges career, without some assurances that she would not succumb to such temptation? We may never know. There may not have been signs that this would happen. Or, perhaps, as there often are, there were signs that others chose to ignore because she had not yet done anything quite so outrageous.

What does her story have to do with our story, you might ask? Her story reminds us why a strong EQ, emotional quotient, is as important as a high IQ. It reminds us what happens when we forget our purpose or when we forget whose rules we need to follow or what might happen if we step beyond prescribed boundaries. Her story may only be about figure skating, but we can see in this woman a side of ourselves we would rather not acknowledge. What happens when we think we know better and we disregard the rules that everyone else has to play by? What happens when we are not strong enough to resist temptation, when we become easy prey to ruthless individuals? How can we be certain that we would not fail as she did if we faced temptation in our marriage, our workplace or when asked to accept a similar responsibility of trust?

The lessons this morning teach us something about preparing ourselves to resist temptation and why having and maintain boundaries is so important to our spiritual, emotional and physical well being. Our first lesson from Genesis lays the groundwork for our temptation woes. We see how easily our spiritual ancestors were coerced into breaking the rules. In the blink of an eye, we too can act against our better judgment. † It is amazing how easily we can disregard the covenants or promises we make to receive what seems good or right at that particular moment. The tempter is gifted at twisting and manipulating the truth until it sounds perfectly logical. In the beginning God gifts humanity with three important things. First we are given the gift of life itself. Second the gift of meaningful work. Thirdly, the gift of freedom within limits. It is this third gift that has caused such tribulation through the ages.

We have a hard time living within limits. When given limits we soon speculate how we might wiggle around them or live slightly beyond them without anyone noticing or suffering too deeply. I remember the movie "Finding Nemo." In the beginning there is a pivotal scene where Nemo tries to move beyond the boundaries his father sets for him. Nemo's father keeps him on a short reign. Nemo is an only child. His fish siblings and mother, Cora were eaten before Nemo was born. He and his father were the only fish to survive. Nemo was born with one fin smaller than the other, and because of this, his father believes Nemo is more limited than his peers. On the first day of school Nemo doesn't want to seem like a sissy, so although his father has forbidden it, he swims with the others to the drop off. His father finds him there and threatens to take him home. While his father is distracted, Nemo defiantly swims further and further away toward the forbidden boat anchored in the distance. He wants to touch the boat to prove to his father and the others that he is just like them. Instead, he is captured in a diver's net. His father then sets out on an odyssey to find his missing son.

Moving beyond our limits and violating boundaries can often lead to tragic consequences. That somehow does not keep us from undertaking risky behavior. Our children do it. We have undoubtedly done it. If we don't pay attention to the warning signs, we are likely to test those boundaries again. I believe we need to pay special attention to Jesus this morning.† I hear in his story more than simply his triumph over temptation. I see him setting more than a good example for us to follow. As I hear this story, again I am reminded that even Jesus needed time away, time in the wilderness to prepare for the grueling journey that awaited him. Immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan River, Matthew says the Spirit of God led Jesus to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This is Jesus' spiritual training program. In the wilderness, Jesus is worked over by God. He strengthens his spiritual muscles, fortifies his spirit to respond to whatever adversity he might face in his ministry. In the wilderness, the devil also tests and tempts Jesus. This is all part of his preparation for his journey to Jerusalem.

Pardon the baseball analogy, but this time in the wilderness might be like spring training. I know it might seem like a stretch, but let me explain. This week baseball players arrive at their spring training facilities to prepare for another season. This is the time to kick their training into high gear. They move out of the gym back onto the baseball field where they increase their mobility and stamina in preparation for another season. Even if they have exercised fastidiously in the off season, they can not make it through an entire season without putting time and effort into spring training. If they miss part of this preparation, they will not be ready for opening day. If they take this time lightly, they will never make it through a long season of more than 160 games and hopefully into the post season. For baseball players, it is necessary to build the physical stamina to endure the long season ahead.

Perhaps Lent is your spiritual spring training. Each one of us might have our own unique training ritual. Many people give something up during Lent. They don't do this simply to prove their own holiness, but to bring themselves into closer relationship with the One who is the source of all that we have. If Jesus could sacrifice in the wilderness, can I also

go without something in my life? Perhaps you commit to do something you neglect other times of the year; daily Bible reading, walking more regularly, knitting a prayer shawl, attending a Bible study. Making that extra effort may be just what you need to jump starting your spiritual life. Whatever it is that you do, presumably you do it to increase your spiritual stamina, to grow stronger in your faith.

As pastors prepare for ministry, we take a course called clinical pastoral education or CPE. It is often likened to a wilderness time. During this training you are vulnerable, you ask many questions and have your limits frequently tested. You have to think on your feet, keep at bay the devil that tries to convince you that you are not good enough, not worthy of taking on the mantle of pastor. Ultimately you emerge either stronger or defeated. During the training it is essential to be spiritually fit, to have a strong and active prayer life, to be unafraid to seek companionship and wise mentors to whom you can bring your doubts and questions. It is imperative that you are willing to hear what others say about you, to reflect honestly to your peers and trust that what does not kill you will only make you stronger.

When our tanks are depleted, when we lose touch with the true source of our power we all become vulnerable. We are more likely to succumb to temptation, to listen to the serpent, to act on his wild suggestions. Spiritual fitness is essential to our well being. I read an article this week about clergy wellness. As the title suggests the author wondered, “what it is about church life that drives so many clergy to unhealthy behaviors?” Naturally the article intrigued me. Many clergy were reported to suffer from obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disease among other maladies. We are less likely to attend to our own physical well being. We are out of shape. We don’t eat properly. We don’t honor our time off. We spend a lot of time meeting the needs of others, while we tend to neglect our own families and our own needs. Now I am not saying that all clergy automatically act this way or experience these troubles, but I read far too much in that article that sounded familiar. Trouble of all kind, is more likely to occur if we don’t attend to our own spiritual wellness.

In order to insure our own well being we must look deep within ourselves and name our own demons. We must be aware of what triggers those buttons that lead us away from self-care and toward unhealthy behaviors. Thankfully, the article did not leave us hanging. It offered ten suggestions to help us take better care of ourselves. If you would like to know more check out this months copy of United Church News. It even offered the opportunity for clergy to join a wellness conversation on line during Lent where we can share our stories and offer for each other strategies for achieving balance and health in vocational ministry.

Taking part in such a discussion could be part of my spiritual spring training. Without these opportunities to learn more, to pray more, to question more, to rest more we can not make it through any of our wilderness moments. This journey through Lent is not a luxury, it is truly essential for all disciples. We can not make the journey if we have forgotten the source of our well being. We can not make it through the toughest times if we are not willing to make this journey with Jesus.† This means taking every step with

him, not slipping in at the last minute, like Rosy Ruiz, (you remember her, the woman who skipped half the Boston Marathon, running only the last few miles and claiming victory) just before Easter arrives. You've heard it said, "no pain, no gain!" The same is equally true for those who labor to strengthen our spiritual muscles. Jesus invites us to join him in the wilderness. Do not be afraid of the temptations that lurk there. Jesus teaches us how to foil the devil. For the sake of our own spiritual health, for the good of our families and communities, I hope we seize this opportunity to journey with Jesus all the way to the cross. There truly are no short cuts if we are to treasure the glory of the resurrection that awaits us. May it be so! Amen

Sources:

The Rev. Dr. George Mason, "Training Days," sermon first Sunday in Lent, February 13, 2005.

Rev. Rick Marshall, "Who am I Going to Trust?"