

Lent 1- Year A- Matthew 4:1-11  
(March 12-13, 2011)- Intern Travis Wilson

Who am I? Who are we? We're people gathered together in this worshipping community, sure; but, deep down, who are we? I know that I am a husband to Kristen, I am a son to my parents, I am a friend to others, and all of those are nice roles; but who am I? Here at First Lutheran, I am your intern, a person in a pastoral leadership role, but yet, I am not quite a pastor. Technically, I am still a seminary student, but this year, I'm not really a student. Sure, I'm learning all kinds of things about ministry and I am doing some on the job training, but I'm not quite a student. I am a musician, a coffee lover, an art lover, a diabetic, a person with a disability, a male- a young male, a writer, a thinker, a wannabe actor, a budding preacher, a sometimes nervous teacher, and one who sometimes struggles with self image. I am all of these things for sure and I am in the in-between place, having one foot here and the other foot there, not ever fully in either. Because of that I am still searching for who I am, I'm searching for something more, I am searching for that which is lacking in me.

Who am I? Who are we? I know that I am not the only one struggling to ask these questions. It often seems that in times of transition, these are precisely the questions that fill our hearts and minds. When I moved from high school to college, from college to the working world, from seminary to here, I asked the same question- who am I? Times of transition tend to bring reflection, introspection, and wonder about what lies ahead.

The folks in the Bible are no strangers to transitions either. The Israelites wonder who they are and what life means for them as they move from their own land into exile in Egypt and then back again to their own land. In our Gospel reading today from Matthew, we get the sense that Jesus is in transition as well. Before our passage begins, Jesus has just been baptized and God proclaims from heaven in a loud voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Then, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the

devil. He spends forty days and nights in the wilderness after which he is famished. This is a period of transition for Jesus; he has heard that he is God's son, yet what does that mean? Who is he?

The devil or tempter comes and tempts Jesus three times. In many of his exchanges with Jesus, the tempter always starts off by saying, "If you are the Son of God..." The first temptation asks Jesus to turn stones into bread. He's famished and hungry and it only makes sense that he would want to display some sort of power in making stones into bread. Jesus' actions in turning stone into bread could give him validity in his own abilities. However, Jesus responds by saying that one lives by the word of God, not bread alone. A second time, the tempter asks Jesus to throw himself down off the pinnacle, the high place, of the temple for it is written that angels will bear him up and he will not be hurt. This is the tempter's test of God's faithfulness, and Jesus won't have it. Jesus, holding firm to the promises of God, will not put God to the test. Finally, the tempter tries to get Jesus to give all of his allegiance to him, and Jesus refuses. After all of both of these temptations, the tempter puts Jesus into the position of not only rejecting the temptation, but also to reject the tempter himself. Jesus says to the tempter, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" and the tempter leaves.

Throughout all of these temptations, Jesus resists the allure to give in to those temptations and he remains confident that his identity and future lie in God's care. Jesus remains firm and strong in his resolve against the tempter, but the scene with Adam and Eve in our first lesson had to have played on the screen in Jesus' mind. Adam and Eve are tempted in our Genesis lesson to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God has specifically forbidden. The serpent (who, by the way, is not this evil being that church history has made it out to be; but is rather part of God's good creation) is their tempter and it calls into question the first humans' trust of God. What calls to Adam and Eve is a deep longing that is rooted within the first human beings from the very beginning to be self-sufficient and to establish their own identity apart from trusting in what God gives them. The tempter in our gospel lesson plays into that same longing that he

was certain was in Jesus when he says, “IF you are the Son of God.” You can hear the tempter ask Jesus, wouldn’t you like to know for sure, do these things and you will surely know; you’ll find your identity on your own. Yet, Jesus comes to know who he is by holding firm to whose he is- he is God’s son.

This past Wednesday night was Ash Wednesday, the day that begins the season of Lent, and also the day that we confess before God our sinful nature and receive ashes on our foreheads as a reminder of our created-ness. This is one of the most somber nights throughout the whole Church year and it sets us on the path to begin our Lenten journey together and to come to terms with our lessons today. Today, we are confronted with our own human condition. We are confronted with the fact that there is a hole inside of our very being that we are trying to fill up. This hole is an emptiness that has been a part of our very being ever since Adam and Eve. They sensed this hole was a part of them through the coaxing of the serpent to seek something that God had not intended, something that indeed drew them, and us, away from the very heart of the divine.

We know this emptiness all too well. We know this emptiness when we pick up the bottle again, take one more hit of that drug all in an effort to feel like we can overcome the world. We know this emptiness when we try and fill the hole, the empty space, by having the perfect spouse, car, or job, more money in the bank, a better house on the corner, when we can keep up with the Jones’ and all that cool stuff they have. We try and fill the hole by raising the best kids, having the ideal family who all get along and who doesn’t argue, by masking our shortcomings instead of naming them, by holding it all together and being the strong rock that everyone expects, by having the perfectly manicured look to show to people in order to hide the mess in our lives. We do indeed know this emptiness this hole inside. Part of our humanity is for us to know at our core that we are insufficient in and of ourselves. In all of our striving to fill this hole, this emptiness, we have to come to terms that we are nothing on our own.

This is what Jesus demonstrates in the midst of his temptations in our Gospel lesson today. There is no filling or even permanently erasing that emptiness or hole in our lives, except through a relationship with God. But even then, the Christian life, the life of discipleship with Jesus, isn't about having that hole, that need, that awareness of our own finiteness taken away. No, to be human, to be Christian is to recognize that we are created to be in relationship with God and one another. To be human is not to find some way that we can escape limitation or temptation, but rather to discover that God meets us in the middle of that temptation. Jesus was tempted throughout his ministry, just like we are, and on account of that temptation, Jesus really knows our struggles and calls us to live and flourish in the midst of them.

Who am I? I am Travis, a broken sinner in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. I am in transition, in the in-between phases of life- not yet this, but not quite that either. Yet, I am not defined by my shortcomings. I am not consumed by my disability like society wants me to be. I am not overcome by my lack of self-image, and I am not giving in to society's messages that if I make more money, hang out with just the right people, or buy this barrage of products that I will have my troubles erased. These things don't define me, and they don't define us either.

Who are we? We are a community of broken sinners in need of forgiveness and who seek reconciliation with each other and with God. We are not a community that has it all together; we do not have perfect people living properly manicured lives. We do have struggles, we are tempted, we live in a society that tries to belittle the power of temptation and suffering and suggests to us that there is a way beyond it, a way to put an end to all that plagues us. We, too, are people in transition- we have kids going off to college, some of us are kids going off to college, we are getting older and are having to look into care centers for ourselves or our family members, we are approaching death and wonder in light of that what lies ahead for us.

However, those temptations in our society to fill that hole or emptiness and those times of transitions are not the defining thing for us. These things are not the last word in life; there is something bigger than these things, something bigger than all we imagine life to be. This something, or rather, someone, is God. Through the waters of baptism, God bids us to die to ourselves, to die to society, to die to transitions and to rise again knowing that we are marked and sealed with the cross forever. God calls us and claims us as God's own children with whom God is well pleased. This is our identity: people claimed by a God who sends God's son to earth to experience struggle, temptation, even death; but who has the last word, who reveals the bigger picture when Jesus rises from the dead. We are a community that stands together in the face of temptation confessing with Jesus our faith and trust in this One whose love and grace is indeed sufficient for our lives.

Amen.