

Sermon for 26 February 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

First Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32 (UMH766); Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

**“Honesty”**

As is often the case with the lectionary, there is so much material offered that we just can't deal with all of it in one Sunday.

This first Sunday of Lent in year A of our three-year cycle of readings, I want to focus on the Gospel lesson. It's the story of Christ's temptation in "the wilderness," right after his designation as God's representative, what humans are capable of, and what they're faced with.

Getting more precise, I want to talk about honesty, because that seems to be a big consideration these days. How often do we hear, "I just don't understand the other side.,"

I propose that Jesus, the representative human ... the new Adam, as Paul calls him ... doesn't talk like that. Already, he understands Satan, and Satan gets nowhere with his temptations.

I want to suggest we use Lent to practice honesty, so that, by the time of Easter's great celebration of victory in Jesus, we can be more confident about our own success as disciples of Jesus.

When I think back about the experiences I've had of overcoming something, or understanding something that's bothered me for a long time, honesty played a real part. I realized I'd been acting like a child for a long time ... maybe always ... and now, I had the chance not to any more ... Even when I fell back into childish ways after that, I knew I could get back up and start off again, better able to make progress than I once was.

It didn't mean the work got easier. Behaving better took just as much energy as being bad, or unfruitful, or sad; but there was hope in the situation that didn't used to be there.

I have a friend from childhood who used to sing, "I'm beginning to see the light." I often hear that inside me when I practice honesty.

I suggest that be our theme in devotions and prayers and just quiet reflections these coming weeks. Meditate on how much you can improve by looking at the dark and light together, instead of sticking in either place for very long. It's OK to stand there for awhile. Soak up where you are. Be real about circumstances; but then allow the Lord to move you on, so you can take in the full picture before you make a decision or accept a mood or an outcome as the final one.

That's one way of interpreting what Jesus is doing in this story today. However it happened, however he became aware of his capabilities and needs, he played an honest hand. He looked, and listened, and saw through the deal he was offered, and literally didn't try to be God. There

was his part, and then a whole dreamwork of other circumstances beyond his control, and they didn't occupy him except to say, "No, thanks."

Take any subject you want. Ukraine, for instance. There's a country that's been bound up in knots as far back as I can read. Not to say it's hopeless, or all innocent, or even guilty in the past year ... but things aren't getting better, and it's time for that to change.

Take our individual lives. I know we can't spend all our time listening to the news; but we're smart enough, and well-situated enough, to make some kind of difference for the better. That's the principle of Jesus, I think, and of being his people. Make a contribution. Pray better. Work at it.

Honestly, I think that's a big part of the story. Start with being honest with yourself. Listen to the Lord as the voice grows within you. Learn to hear it better and better. Then see what's going on around you, then in Baltimore, then on and out the door and into infinity. The Lord can use you. Walk in the light. Walk in the truth. Or, as the saying goes, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself."

Honesty.

Godspeed.

Amen.