

Sermon – March 1, 2020

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

“What’s in Your Wallet?”

I pull out my wallet and look through what’s there:

- a little cash
- a couple of credit cards
- an ATM card
- a couple of pre-paid debit cards that I got as utility company rebates
- I used to carry an IKEA loyalty card. That one cost me more than it saved.
- I used to carry a card for the DC Metro. You just scan it every time you go through the turnstile. That marked me as a local in the big city.
- my health insurance card
- a AAA card in case my car breaks down
- a Texas Driver’s License – That says something, too....

Think of all the ways we identify ourselves –

- by our clothes
- by our neighborhood
- by our profession – in some faith groups clergy wear a collar

When I was a volunteer chaplain at Baptist Health in Little Rock we were required to wear a coat and tie or “Sunday dress” for the women. With the exception of the upper level administrators, we were the only people who dressed like that. During orientation a big group of us were taken through the entire hospital. When we all went into the ER – this large group of people all dressed like chaplains – the staff there thought there had been a massive accident and that they were about to be flooded with injured folks. Our director quickly put them at ease. “It’s ok. This is just an orientation group. Not to worry. There’s not a throng of patients about to arrive.”

- We're identified by our workplace. I think I can take ninety percent of the church directory names, Google them along with the word, "Baylor," and a Baylor web page will pop up.
- some people probably identify themselves by who they know. In Arkansas back in the 90's some people were informally identified as FOB's. Friends of Bill.... Clinton, that is.
- by our families. Cindy loves her grandmother name: Marmee. It's comes from "Little Women. She and our daughters used to watch the movie version every Christmas. In case you're curious, my grandparent name is "Pappa." It doesn't come from our ancestors. I got it from "Fiddler on the Roof." My youngest called me that once when she was a little girl and I decided way back then it would be my grandfather name.

Back in the 90's there was a bright young man who headed to DePauw University to be an economics major. He was an outstanding student. During his time at DePauw he was named to the Management Fellows Honors Program. After graduation he landed a wonderful job with the Eli Lilly corporation.

In the summer of 2000, he walked away from his career as an economist. Just up and quit. He left his job not having another job waiting for him.

He became a volunteer in the Butler University basketball office. Plenty to do, but no salary. His plans included living in a friend's basement and getting a part-time job at Applebee's. He reasoned that the longer he stayed with Lilly, the harder it would be to leave. Getting used to having a good salary and all that went with it would likely kill his dream.

He eventually became an assistant coach and then the head coach. His first year as head coach he was the 2nd youngest NCAA Division 1 coach. That year they finished 30-4, won their conference, and went to the NCAA tournament. His second year

he was the 6th coach in NCAA history to record 50 wins in 56 total games or less. His third year his team was the first in school history to reach the Final Four. They were the also first to reach the Final Four in the history of their conference! Butler also became the smallest school to make the Final Four since tournament seeding began in 1979. They were runner-up to Duke that year and runner-up the next year to Connecticut. Where is Brad Stevens now? He's the coach of the NBA's Boston Celtics.

You see, Brad's identity was not in being an economist. It wasn't to be found in the corporate world. Brad Stevens was born to be a basketball coach.

Who are you? What's in your wallet? How is your identity defined?

Jesus grew up in the village of Nazareth. He was Joseph & Mary's boy. You remember when they left him in Jerusalem? It took them three days to find him. There he was. Hanging out with the rabbis. But he was a good worker with his dad, Joe. They could build or fix just about anything. Good kid. He didn't seem to care for much of anything except Torah and latest word from the Rabbi. He had a cousin named John who spent his time preachin' outside of town. Jesus went to meet up with John and John dips him in the Jordan River. Something incredible happens: A voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

I think hearing that voice stirred something in Jesus. I think it was that voice that drove Jesus to the wilderness. He needed to do some thinking, some praying. He needed to process what in the world all this meant.

He needed to get away. Do you ever need to just get away? Take a break from your routine? Especially when you have some big decisions to make?

Jesus was at a crossroads. He'd been serious about the life of faith, but he'd also been serious about being faithful to his family. But it was time to strike out on his own, to decide what comes next. *It was time to seek the face of God.* And it's tough to do that without walking away from distractions, without getting away from your regular routine.

So Jesus did what thinkers and teachers have done for millennia. He got away from people. He went to the wilderness. He removed all distractions and focused on the presence of God in his life.

He went to the wilderness to find out who he was, to find his own identity. He went to answer this question:

What was it going to mean to be the Jesus that God was calling him to be?

He went to find what was in his wallet.

He'd heard his mother talk about how Gabriel had come to her, how there was something special about how he came to be. He'd heard about angels and shepherds and wise men. He'd heard the rabbis and even the chief priests talk about the nature of God and that God would someday send a Messiah, an anointed one, to rescue God's people.

Jesus' mind and his heart were full of stories he'd heard his entire life about this powerful and mighty God who loved with a love beyond words. His mom was still talking about the mightiness and holiness of God, how God would bring down the proud and lift

up the humble, how the hungry would be fed and the rich would be sent away, about how God's mercy would last for generation after generation...

But what did all this mean for Jesus? How was he supposed to act on all of that, to live the life that he was called to lead? *Who was he anyhow?*

It was more than he could process in Nazareth, more than he could find in the waters of the Jordan. So, he went to the wilderness.

In the wilderness his choices came into focus. He had a series of choices. These choices are commonly referred to as temptations and rightly so. They're temptations that face us all even today.

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

The first choice was for provision. He had to choose between a life of want and a life of plenty. Jesus could have gone on back to Nazareth. We don't know if Joseph was still alive, but there's little doubt that at this point in his life Jesus had skills. He very likely worked with Joseph in the family business. There are 1st century ruins of an ancient Roman city called Seforis just over the hill from Nazareth. In the 1st century it was called *Diocaesaraea*. Scholars speculate about whether Jesus and Joseph worked to help build the buildings of that town. I think it's fair to say that Jesus likely had a future of at least some prosperity waiting for him if he just walked away from this crazy God-calling and went back to Nazareth.

Temptation Number Two: "Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you

are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Would Jesus choose protection in a world that was simply not safe? The second temptation was to choose between security and risk. Jesus lived in a world of Roman persecution. He could have been arrested at any moment by the authorities for no reason at all. In a world of abject poverty, there were thieves and robbers who would think nothing about killing him for only the clothes on his back. No doubt disease devastated many during those days in ways we can't understand today. To choose the life of an itinerant preacher would mean being constantly on the road, constantly moving between the relative safety of communities and walking paths that took him through dangerous country.

Then came the third temptation: “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’”

This is the big one. Choose this and you get all the rest. (It's like the Showcase Showdown on the “Price is Right.”)

What Jesus is being offered here is power. Pure, unrestricted, unambiguous power. Power to do what he wanted, when he wanted, however he wanted. Control of his life, his destiny, his world. Power and control. If that's not a temptation, I don't know what is.

When I read the temptations, I didn't read Jesus' answers from Scripture. We know what he chose. Jesus chose the way of having little, of being at risk, of having no control and no power.

He knew what was in his wallet.

Jesus chose a way that would lead to a cross. What could better represent the giving up of provision, protection, and power than a humiliating death on a Roman cross?

The journey that ended on that cross began in the wilderness. I think the wilderness was even more important to Jesus search for identity than his baptism.

Jesus worked out his own identity through the choices he made. And every day we do the same. Frederick Buechner tells this story:

"The way I understood it," my grandmother says, "you were supposed to devote these talks to religious matters. Incarnation and Grace and Salvation were some of the noble words you used."

I say that feet are very religious too. She says that's what you think. I say that if you want to know who you are, if you are more than academically interested in that particular mystery, you could do a lot worse than look to your feet for an answer. Introspection in the long run doesn't get you very far because every time you draw back to look at yourself, you are seeing everything except for the part that drew back, and when you draw back to look at the part that drew back to look at yourself, you see again everything except for what you are really looking for. And so on. Since the possibilities for drawing back seem to be infinite, you are, in your quest to see yourself whole, doomed always to see infinitely less than what there will always remain to see. Thus, when you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to

know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are.

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Some say, "You are what you eat."

I say, "You are what you choose."

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Your own unique identity is like a fingerprint or a scan of your retina. Your identity is yours and yours alone. There has never been another you and there will never ever be another you. You're the only one who can become the person you've been called to be. That sounds self-evident, doesn't it? Maybe a bit silly. Of course, you're the only one who can become you. Yet how many of us live our lives in a way that shows we actually know who we are? How many of us are dealing with trouble of so many kinds simply because we're trying to live someone else's dream? Or we're still wandering in the wilderness, waiting for God to speak?

In what ways are you avoiding becoming that person? In what ways are you taking the easy way out? Avoiding your own identity? Finding shortcuts or ways around being the person you were called to be?

Making choices that don't line up with who you are?

The only way to find the peace of God is to find the identity God has placed within you. It's what Jesus found in the desert.

The truth of identity is reflected in an old Hasidic story. Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they

will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'why were you not Zusya?'"¹

How do you identify yourself? I have no idea what all that means for you. That's for you and God to work out. But I know that the choices that we make not only *reflect* who we are, but they also actually *shape* who we are.

We are what we choose.

Go this week and claim who you are and make your choices accordingly.

What a wonderful privilege!

Thanks be to God!

¹ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 251. as cited in Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers 2000), p. 11.