

"Come and Worship God!"

Psalms 100
September 13, 2009

Matthew 4:1-11
St. James UCC

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It's good to be together here this morning. There is an energy, a special sense of excitement running through the air. The sanctuary is filled. Children and youth and adults are everywhere, and it feels great!

That stands in contrast to how our services have felt over the summer months, when there were many fewer people and usually only a handful of children at our services. While summer is a time for vacations and renewal, and runs at a different pace, it also carries a sense of incompleteness, of waiting for the days that are like this, when our community is back together and ready to work together. During the summer we felt like we were only part, for it was only part of us that were here at any one time, and now it feels like we are whole once again.

Our experience isn't unusual in that regard. Churches all over Hamburg are encountering that same difference today - and not just in Hamburg, but throughout the country. During the summer months when the weather is nice, and we know that it will only be nice for a while, we have other priorities, other things that we choose to do. This summer was pretty cool and wet as summers go, but we also had a bunch of really nice days, and if anything they were more precious because of all the rainy days.

Fall comes, and with it the reminder that it is important to worship, that it is important to be part of this faith community, and so we return. We return refreshed and renewed, but also reminded that it's a good thing that God didn't take the summer off!

In our text from the gospel of Matthew we find Jesus in the wilderness. He has gone there after His baptism for a time of preparation, a time that is to prepare Him for the ministry that is to follow. There in the wilderness He fasts and prays for forty days and nights, and in a masterpiece of understatement we're told that after being without food for that long, "Jesus was hungry".

I can't even imagine what it is to be without food for 40 days, but I do remember a time back in college when I fasted for 3 days. On the third day several of us went grocery shopping in preparation for a get together that night where we would break our fast. I remember very clearly walking through the store and filling the cart with far more food than we could possibly eat. I remember how good everything looked, and then the shock of realizing that things looked good to me that I didn't even like. My mind knew what

was going on, but this almost uncontrollable desire for food was welling up from inside. When I think about Jesus fasting for that long, that's how I imagine Him feeling - this uncontrollable desire welling up from inside.

It is in that context that the devil comes to Jesus and tempts Him, saying "If you are God's Son, order these stones to turn into bread." Imagine the temptation. Prove that You are God's son. This will be easy for you. Just turn a few stones into bread. Your hunger will be satisfied, and You can use the rest to feed the needy, the ones who never have enough to eat.

Then the devil takes Jesus up to the highest point on the Temple in Jerusalem, the most notable place around, where everyone could easily see. The Devil tells Jesus to throw Himself down. Do something spectacular that will capture everyone's attention, Jesus, for You and I both know that God will protect You.

Finally the Devil takes Jesus to a high mountain, shows Him the kingdoms of the world, and says: "all this I will give you, if you kneel down and worship me."

The temptation is there. The temptations were real for Jesus and they are real for us. The Devil offers a way that seems so easy, that looks so appealing, but Jesus remembered something very important. He responded to the Devil by remembering who He is, and whose He is. For Jesus knew that He belonged to God, and from that perspective He could see how empty the appeal of those temptations really was.

For example, the temptation to turn the stones into bread. Yes that would feed the pangs of hunger that were shooting through His body. Yes that would even help him to feed others who were hungry and to get their attention for a while, attention that would last for as long as He had food to give. But Jesus knew that it wouldn't address other even more important needs, and so He responded "Man cannot live on bread alone, but needs every word that God speaks."

Jesus knew that and responded to the Devil by saying that we cannot live on bread alone - the needs of the body are not all that there is, or even our most important needs. We need God. We need God's presence and God's love. We need God's word in our lives, guiding our lives, for then and only then are we whole.

That's why Jesus was able to see through the temptations of the Devil, even the last one in which He tried to offer Jesus everything that He hoped to accomplish in His ministry. It was like He said to Jesus, "why go through the pain and the frustration of these next few years. The people won't really understand anyway. In the end they're only going to crucify You. And for what? If You want them to follow You, I will give You that. All of the kingdoms of the world will be Yours, just kneel down and worship me."

You see Jesus knew that what He was about was not enslaving people so that they were

obedient to Him because they had no other choice, or because they were drawn by the spectacles of Him jumping off of buildings or turning stones into bread. Jesus came to call people to search in their hearts, to look in their innermost spirits, to come to know that they belong to God, because that is who they are.

In the 100th Psalm, the Psalmist doesn't tell us to come and worship reluctantly, but rather with joy and happy songs. Worship is meant to be a celebration in which we are reminded that we are God's people, that we belong to God, and that is reason to rejoice and give thanks. For God is good, and it is a wonderful thing to belong to God.

That is what we are about here today - celebrating and giving thanks. For after a summer that for many of us has held other priorities, priorities that have taken us away from worship, we gather today knowing that it is good to remember who we are, and whose we are. We are a people who belong to God. We need to worship and give thanks, for that is what nourishes us in a way far deeper and far more sustaining than food ever can.

Let us pray:

Loving God we thank You for creating us, for claiming us, and for walking with us through all that we experience in life. You are always there, loving and encouraging us, guiding and renewing us, and helping us to live faithfully and fully. There is so much that we would thank You for, so much that You have given to us.

Remind us of how much we need to worship You, to offer You our thanks and our praise, as we acknowledge ourselves to be Your people and You to be our God. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen.