

We choose to own up to the commitments we haven't been keeping, risking that shame or guilt, so that we can find a new way to live with honor and honesty.

We choose to take another step in faith, to ask the deeper questions, to approach God in a new way, even when that scares a little. Even when it asks us to work a little harder.

And when we make those choices, we become more than admirers. We come closer to being Jesus' followers, his disciples.

The world is always tempting us to get what we want the easy way. To ignore the bad stuff. To focus only on the good stuff. But the hard stuff is where we often find new pieces of ourselves. It's often where we find God. The cross, the tomb, praying alone in the garden at night - those are places Christ has been and promises to meet us when we are there. When we resist the devil's pull to side-step the tough stuff, we may find angels attending us, too, and the light of Christ shining.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

February 26, 2023

First Sunday of Lent

“Resist: Becoming Followers, Not Admirers”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Matthew 4:1-11

Logan Lane is the 17 year old founder of the Luddite Club at her high school in Brooklyn, New York.¹ Her club members are all teenagers who resist the pull of technology and its growing hold on their lives. Just a couple of years ago, Logan was a screen-addicted teen, spending hours curating her social media presence on Instagram and TikTok. But she began to question whether she liked the person she was becoming; whether this technology was a good thing in her life or not. So she made a decision to give up her phone, cold turkey. Over time, Logan gathered other friends who also wanted to get rid of the technology that was hampering their lives rather than helping them.

When the Luddite Club meets up, they have to find ways to navigate around the city *other* than pulling up Google maps. They communicate with each other in person because they can't text. Having no phones makes these teenagers weird among their peers. It complicates life in some ways. Logan isn't even sure if she'll be able to maintain this practice when she goes to college. But she made the decision to ditch her phone because she needed to resist the negative effects it was having on her life, her mental health, her self-image, her time. She now enjoys reading and crafting with all the time she has to enjoy. Her act is one of personal resistance to the gleam of technology in her life. And hers is also public resistance to the world that tells her she needs a device simply to function as a human being. Logan is choosing a much harder path, but one that leads toward an existence she finds truly life-giving.

The life of faith has always meant resisting some of the ways of the world. Christian faith says yes to lots of things: love, grace, people who are different from us, whether neighbors or enemies. We say yes to the goodness of our bodies, of joy, laughter, and embracing the people God made us to be. But there are also some aspects of life that we are called to resist; to say 'no' to. Those include anything that pulls us away from God and from who God has created us to be.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness illustrates this kind of resistance. The resistance Jesus shows us does not just go against the ways of the world *out there* - evil, violence, discord, broken relationships. Jesus illustrates how to resist the pull inside ourselves to live in a way other than God intends.

¹ “The Teenager Leading the smart-phone liberation movement,” Feb 2, 2023, First Person Podcast, hosted by Lulu Garcia-Navarro,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/02/opinion/teen-luddite-smartphones.html>

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press 2006), 57. .

³ From James McClendon's *Biography as Theology*, qtd. in Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press 2006), 57.

Perhaps that pull is what Jesus encountered in the devil. That image of the devil is tricky to understand. But his character symbolizes all the powers that try to oppose God and what God wants for the world.

The temptation occurred at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. From his baptism, the Holy Spirit led him directly to the wilderness to face this temptation. The things the devil tempted, Jesus would later achieve, in his own, faithful way. We know the words the devil said: turn the stones to bread, jump down from the temple, and get the whole world to love you. Later on in the gospels, we know the story of Jesus turning a few paltry loaves and fish into a veritable feast for thousands of people. That was basically stones into bread. But when Jesus offered his miracle, it was not to feed himself alone. It was to feed a gathered community, to help others. Jesus did go to the temple in Jerusalem, but not in a triumphal way. Jesus went there humbly, riding on a donkey - that famous parade we remember on Palm Sunday. Finally, nations did stream to Jesus to worship him, as we see at Epiphany and as we anticipate in God's promised future. But not because of Jesus' power and might. Rather, because of his offering and love, freely given to the world.

Jesus was going to achieve similar things in his ministry anyway. But the devil urged him to get to those points much more easily. To speed the process up, no matter what God intended. To jump ahead, without dealing with the humility or the sacrifice that Jesus knew lay before him. The temptation was ultimately to bypass the cross.

For Logan, the world tells her to find her self-worth in the obvious path of Instagram and TikTok. But she's discovered that her life is much more meaningful when she makes the harder choice to give up technology and to enjoy real experiences spent on her own and with her friends. How are we tempted to speed things up and get to where we want to go by an easier path?

Are we tempted to put a band-aid on relationships that are hurting, and call things good, instead of walking through the mucky middle to reconcile what has been broken?

Are we tempted to ignore our own suffering, because it is difficult to face up to the pain in our own lives?

Are we tempted to justify the places we're falling short of our commitments because life is just so busy?

Are we tempted to give up on our faith or on church because we don't want to put in the effort to grow or change when things feel stagnant?

Might these be temptations we are called to resist? Might Jesus' story invite us to reframe these experiences? Jesus may be calling us to resist our desire for what is easy or quick, and instead to be willing to enter the difficult things. He might be asking us to walk through the parts of life that are more challenging, promising to be by our side. Not because Lent is about making us suffer and not because Jesus wants us to feel hardship. But

because faithfulness is often forged in those challenges. Our trust in God is strengthened when we resist the ease of giving up or giving in or papering over our struggles. Our connection with God grows when we strive instead for the fullness of life God intends. Even when it takes us on the harder road. Even when it points toward the cross.

Stanley Hauerwas says that Christians are called to be "followers rather than admirers of Jesus."² It's easy to admire Jesus in the story of his temptation. But admiration doesn't do much beyond making Jesus into a celebrity. Followers of Jesus are people who seek to live the way he did. To resist ease and evil the way he did. To embrace the kind of life that Jesus said embodied the realm of God.

Clarence Jordan was the founder of Koinonia Farm in the middle part of the 20th century. The Farm is an intentional Christian community in Georgia, founded on principles of racial reconciliation, with ties to Habitat for Humanity. There's a story about Clarence talking to his brother Robert Jordan in the early 1950s, recorded by James McClendon in his book *Biography as Theology*. Robert, who went by Bob in his family, later became a state senator and a justice on the Georgia Supreme Court. Clarence had asked Bob to be the attorney for Koinonia Farm. Bob replied,

'Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got.'

'We might lose everything, too, Bob.'

'It's different for you.'

'Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said 'Yes.' What did you say?'

[Bob replied,] 'I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.'

'Could that point by any chance be - the cross?'

'That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified.'

'Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple.'

'Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't *have* a church, would we?'

'The question,' Clarence said, 'is, 'Do you have a church?''³

I think most of us are tempted to be like Robert, to try to skirt around the tough stuff. We're tempted to follow Jesus, up to a point. We are not Jesus, so we will not always be able to resist that temptation. But we do get to try. We can choose the uncomfortable conversations, because those are the ones that lead to understanding.

We choose to deal with our own pain and trauma because that is the way that might lead us back to health.