Waiting to Inhale:
The Temptation

A sermon preached by
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Lent 1

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

“God formed humans from the dust of the ground, and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)

It is God’s creative act which puts into motion that which we call life; creation comes to life in this selfless act of a willing, loving God. The wind of God sweeps across the void; the breath of God blows into our nostrils so that we might live out God’s love in this created world.

Brilliant theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes about creatio ex nihilo, “creation out of nothingness.” Before creation existed, there was nothing – a “formless void” is how we translate the original Hebrew of Genesis. “The earth was a formless void.” But, says Moltmann, God had to first bring about that nothingness. If God is all that “exists” prior to what we call “creation,” and God is not “nothing,” is not the primordial chaos, then God must move aside to make room for nothingness to come into existence. God does that by withdrawing God’s self to make room for first the formless void and then room for the creation which follows.

“God does not create merely by calling something into existence,” writes Moltmann, “or by setting something afoot. In a more profound sense God ‘creates’ by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing God’s self.” God fully inhales to make room for a selfless act of creating – God breathes in completely so that now there is room for the nothingness and then from there God can exhale so that creation can happen.

This Lent I want us to be talking some about that idea. God breathes in completely to make room for the exhale breath that brings us into being. God does not need us – did not need to create – because God simply was and is and always will be. Yet God chose to make room in the nothingness that resulted when God withdrew that breath so that when God exhaled life came into being.
It’s a beautiful concept if you can let it work into your brain and into your meditative life over these next few weeks of Lent.

Inhale. Exhale.

God exhales and creation comes into existence. God exhales and blows into the nostrils of creation and it is alive. God inhales and makes room for a new thing; God exhales and creates.

The second idea I want us to be working with this Lent is the reality that we are all broken. We say it all the time, right? "No one is perfect." Bumper sticker theology – "Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” But do we really believe it? Don’t we often act as if we are the center of the universe and all that we have to offer and be is the perfectness that only God can be? We are judgmental as we measure all else against ourselves.

We were talking about this in a small group several years ago – a Lenten study group at another church where I served – about how God calls us to work toward perfect love, that God desires for us to live righteous lives and to continue to be better and better all the time. A tiny, elderly woman – one of those gentle ladies that you can imagine at tea time wearing white gloves and a pillbox hat – couldn’t imagine the possibility. She said something like, “How can I be any better than I am? I don’t sin, I’m always good, I don’t smoke or drink, I go to church and try and help other people. I can’t imagine how I could be any better.” She wasn’t being arrogant or obstinate, she just couldn’t imagine that anything was wrong in her life.

She could not accept the possibility that there was brokenness somewhere inside. Yet there is. I don’t recall now the full circumstance of her life but there was brokenness there once you scraped away the falsity of perfection on the surface. There was, I think, a son that wouldn’t speak to her or some conflict with a friend that was the other person’s fault or some strained relationship within the congregation. Somewhere even within the life of a tiny little church lady there was brokenness.

In the recent film, The Words, Bradley Cooper is Rory Jansen, a struggling young writer who can’t get a publisher to print his novels. Rory finds an unpublished story in a hidden pocket in an old attaché case which he and his wife, Dora played by Zoe Saldana, pick up in an antique shop in Paris. Rory takes the story and through a series of circumstances ends up publishing it as his own – it becomes the great American novel that everyone dreams of writing and success is suddenly his.

Until the Old Man (Jeremy Irons) appears, the Old Man who was once a young man with a broken heart who wrote of his personal traumatic life of love and conflict, the original creator of this story which told of his love as a young man, his marriage to a beautiful woman, the birth of their baby and the happiness – nearly perfectness – of their life being lived together. And then the baby died, their life was ripped apart, their marriage torn into pieces, and they left behind a once seemingly perfect existence to live lives apart and broken.

Rory has plagiarized this man’s story, book, pain, anguish, brokenness – he has taken this man’s life and made it his own. And because of it, Rory’s life begins to come unraveled as he is confronted with what it will mean to come clean as people discover that the great American novel really isn’t his. This single act of plagiarism begins to wreak havoc in many different places – Rory and Dora’s marriage is falling part because if his lie, his publisher is destroyed if its revealed that he has published a plagiarized book, the Old Man is dragged down into his painful journey once again, the readers’ trust will be once again weakened.
Rory shows up at the greenhouse where the Old Man works bringing life into existence in plants and flowers. He wants to give the Old Man money which the man refuses.

“I just want to make things right,” Rory pleads with passion in his voice. “I just want to make things right.”

“You can’t,” insists the Old Man in a stern voice, “Things are just things. … We all make our choices in life, the hard thing to do is live with them.”

Sometimes when things are broken, they can’t be fixed and the only thing we can do is live with the brokenness.

That is what Lent offers us. A time to slow down a bit, reflect and consider the brokenness in our lives, a moment to realize that mostly things are just things and they can’t be “made right” by any action on our part.

That’s the piece of pottery in your hand (from what we broke in the Children’s Sermon – from the pottery display on the table at the front of the Sanctuary in Lent). It is the brokenness in your life that cannot be repaired. This Lent carry that with you – or put it in your mediation corner at home or in your car or somewhere where it will be a constant reminder of the brokenness.

That leads us to the third concept I need us to receive today. The temptation. Jesus faced it in the wilderness so we must face it in our Lenten wilderness over these 40 days. The temptation is to want to live as if nothing in our lives is broken. Jesus heads out into the wilderness to allow himself time and focus and quiet, not to simply “get away from it all” as we so often want to do on a “vacation” from the everyday lives that we live, but to retool for the passion which he knew he would face if he was to do what God wanted him to do.

It was there in that wilderness that he was tempted. Tempted, says Luke, to live only on the bread of this world, the “things” of this life rather than the living of a life of God’s abundance. He is tempted to rule as the world rules, to be judging and demanding and critical, to judge everything over and against a misguided sense that I am perfect. He is tempted to question God, to forget who is creator and who is created, tempted to believe that God cares more about one child – him/me – than any other. Jesus is tempted in all three encounters to live as if there is no brokenness.

So are we also faced with that temptation. We pretend that “things can be made right” and that the brokenness around us is something to be conquered. And we look to a victorious God to overcome any sliver of brokenness rather than surrender to God who lets us repair what can be repaired and to live with the scars left behind.

I heard Bishop Ernest Lyght earlier this week talking about how we fail to leave our burdens on the shoulders of Jesus. We come to church, we come to the altar, where we are invited to lay our burdens down, but then when worship is finished we pick up those burdens again and walk out the door. But that’s not the invitation, is it? The invitation is to lay your burdens down – bring your brokenness to God and let it be repaired – so that we not carry those burdens with us anymore. That’s the Lenten challenge, I think/. Lay your burdens here – bring your brokenness and ask for repair – and then walk away from them fully whole.

That’s the big broken pot on the altar this morning. Broken. Our brokenness.

But maybe not beyond repair and refitting, retooling for another purpose. Each week let’s repair and patch this together. Sure, the scars will be seen and it probably can’t be used for its original purpose again, but let’s work on the brokenness and see what the outcome is.
And the conclusion to Lent? Jesus on the cross – where inhale is complete. On the cross one is has fully inhaled and death comes from the lack of breathing in and out – asphyxiation. God in the cross takes in one full inhale of the brokenness that is our lives – that was Jesus’ life – breathes it all in and makes room for a final exhale when the body is removed from the cross – whew, breath out, forgiveness.

On the cross – inhale – the brokenness of the world pulled into this child of God hung on a cross. Taken down from the cross – a (the?) great exhale of forgiveness breathed into our broken lives.

Yet God has waited to inhale. If, as Luke writes, “When the tempter had finished every test, [it] departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time” and we want to read this to mean that the Passion is the opportune time – that the arrest, trial, beating, suffering, crucifixion, and death are the Tempter’s opportune time – then God has also waited for the opportune time to inhale completely once again. In the crucifixion the inhale is complete and God makes room for breathing out forgiveness by inhaling the brokenness of this world.

The cross is then greatest foolishness the world has to offer and so we must laugh at its attempted finality. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” writes Paul to the Corinthian Church, “… Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:18-23) Or, stay with Jürgen Moltmann for a moment, “God weeps with us so that we may one day laugh with God.”

God weeps at the rejection of this child of God named Jesus. But then God laughs at the crucifixion and death, because God has waited for this moment to inhale. And then God exhales at the next opportune moment – the resurrection that brings Lent to a close.

Amen.