

Sermon: Jesus and Me and The Mid-Life Crisis**Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 22, 2026**

I am 56. When I was 40 I had the proverbial mid-life crisis. It almost made me laugh how predictable it was, nearly to the day of my 40th birthday. It hit me like a ton of bricks. It almost made me laugh, but I actually wept and wailed and gnashed my teeth. It was a multifaceted and multilayered midlife crisis - maybe they all are - but what precipitated it was a sense that the life I was living, specifically the work I was doing, I had not actually chosen for myself but it had been hoisted upon me... and I suddenly wondered how in the world I got there.

I was serving a church in VT at the time, had been there for 10 years, when suddenly, quite out of nowhere, in a spiritual direction session I wondered out loud if being a pastor was truly about me or was more about what my father and grandfather had done and I had just blindly followed suit. My dad was a lovely guy and in no way pressured me to follow in his footsteps, nor did my grandfather, but follow I did and I was just going along, went to seminary for 4 years out in California, did an internship as an associate pastor in Salt Lake City, found a job as a solo pastor in Vermont when I was 30 and it was a great little church and all was hunky dory, lalala, until I was crushed by that ton of bricks that left me breathless and shocked wondering if this was truly me or what others expected of me.

It was really really unpleasant.

Ask Tracy, who was my lifeline keeping me barely afloat.

When I applied to this job 11 years ago now, unbeknownst to the search committee or any of you of course, I was just on the other side of this mid-life crisis, where I was wanting out of church ministry. I eventually came to terms with

it obviously, through much internal work that this work was in fact what I wanted to do. Coming here in fact was a confirmation and renewal that parish ministry was what I loved and wanted to be doing and where I believed God wanted me to be. But man, was it a harrowing process to get there.

We lived in the parsonage of that church in VT and there was a little patch of woods between the church and the parsonage and there were some Sunday mornings where I would stand at the trail head of the pathway through the woods that led to the church and ask God to help me to go, just get me through the path and get me through the morning and I would make it there all crumpled inside and get up in front of the church and say “good morning and welcome to worship, so glad to see you this morning!” It was no reflection on the church and its people. They were good and lovely people there, it was a shadow just over my own spirit somehow, and I’m not sure even now despite the work I did in that shadow time in my interior self if I fully understand it, but a deep shadow it was.

The trailhead, you might say, the entrypoint, leading into that dark shadowland, as I said, had something to do with a sense that where I found myself in my life I had not chosen myself but had allowed others to choose for me. That wasn’t the whole story, but it definitely was a part of it that I had to come to terms with. And this is some reflection I think of the heart of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, his profound struggle, to remain true to himself and what he was called to and not be thrown off-course or otherwise determined by those around him, in particular the devil as the story is written. For what Jesus had to face in his life and his public ministry, he had to get really really clear on what was HIS call, what was his unique path that God was drawing him down, what was his internal truth and direction, cause there were going to be a ton of expectations and pressures from the outside to do something, anything, other than that. People were going to be only too eager to choose what shape they would think his life should take.

To start with as God's Son - which he was just named in his baptism, right - "this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased" - As God's Son, for instance, he was going to be someone who could transcend and override the laws of the natural world for his purposes. He should and would be able to turn water into wine, heal the sick, raise the dead, multiply fish and loaves. So the devil leans in and says, "hey, you're hungry, turn these rocks into bread for yourself." Jesus was out there to fast and pray, to deny himself and to turn his attention fully to God and what God would be asking of him in the months and years to come, but the Tempter began to work on him and had other ideas for him. And SO many others would have different ideas for him in the coming days too from what he was actually going to have to do. Jesus responds to the devil by quoting scripture - "man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In other words, I am trying to live by God's word and at God's direction and for God's purposes, I only and always have got to do that, it's my destiny and you, devil, are trying to get me thinking in another way. Get behind me!" Only a little while later his own Mother (ahh, even Jesus had mother issues), asks him to turn the water at a wedding party into wine and Jesus says "c'mon mom! My time has not come yet!" She too is trying to determine him but unlike his response to the devil, Jesus in this instance wisely says "ok, mom" and does the miracle. God was probably like - "yeah, that's what I would have done, Jesus. The devil is one thing, your mom is another!" But still the point - Jesus must grapple with his mission and purpose and integrity in that and what everyone else around him is asking or expecting of him.

So as I mentioned right before the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus is baptized with the voice of God saying "this is my son, the beloved with whom I am well-pleased." And so next, the devil, the Tempter, grabs onto this beautiful expression of God's love and Jesus' chosenness and says "Ok, well, now, IF you

are the Son of God, prove it. Throw yourself down and if God has his designs and purposes for your life then he won't let you get hurt, will he?" It's very insidious. (You know the word insidious comes from the same word as insider) The devil gets into the inside of this intimate relationship between God and Jesus and begins to try and draw him away from it with an ever-so-subtle wedge or seed of doubt. "Just test it out, double check it, to ensure that you really heard what you thought you heard that you are God's beloved?? Really?" The pressure that Jesus will get from the religious authorities and the others in his circles over the course of the next 3 years will be intense in this way, for him to prove who he says he is by doing what others want and expect him to do. Jesus responds to the devil with another scripture - "do not put the Lord your God to the test." And the devil's like darn it! But he's not done.

Being the Son of God is pretty much the pinnacle of all power. You can't actually get any more powerful than that. How Jesus is going to use that power and how anyone else in their right mind would use that power is very very different. Jesus will for the most part relinquish that power, and relinquish it absolutely. Jesus will toss that ring of power, to speak in JRR Tolkien terms, into the fires of Mordor while everyone around him will want to use that power for their own purposes and ideas, even the best of them, with the very best of intentions. Judas will want to use it to start a revolution. James and John to have chosen places in heaven, others to finally redeem Israel to the defeat of Rome. But Jesus knows what Lord Acton knew when he said, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We're watching it happen all around us nearly all the time now. So Jesus' solution to his absolute power was to allow it in him to be crucified to a cross, destroyed. It's maybe the greatest test for Jesus to overcome. The devil says "I'll give you all these kingdoms if you bow down and worship me, if you take the ring of power for yourself," and Jesus says "Away with you Satan, and Jesus quotes the most famous

of all quotes from his Hebrew scriptures and says “worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” It’s all right there. Worship the Lord Your God and serve only him. As Bob Dylan sings “you’re gonna have to serve somebody, it may be the devil, it may be the Lord but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Jesus chooses to service the Lord.

Jesus’ harrowing wilderness sojourn is an intensive crash course in serving God alone, to become aware of how his own ego might undermine that and how most everyone around him will try to undermine that as well. Those 40 days and 40 nights are such a harrowing time for him that later when his disciples ask him to give them a prayer to pray he includes this line in the prayer, he says “ask God not to lead you not into temptation but to deliver you from evil.” That’s Jesus thinking back on his nightmarish experience in the wilderness and suggesting to the disciples that they do NOT want to go there!

And so where does your temptation lie? It’s a good Lenten question. How are you tempted away from what is truest and deepest in yourself by the voices and expectations around you? How has God called you uniquely into this world with your particular gifts and skills and weaknesses and frailties to contribute to the building of God’s realm? And how do others’ expectations or society’s presumptions or our cultural norms keep that unique path from unfolding?

In considering it you’re not allowed to make it other people’s fault or problem if you’ve been drawn off-course and you’re living someone else’s expectation. That in and of itself can be a temptation, not to acknowledge fully your own complicity and the goodies that you’re in fact getting out of the course you are taking. It’s very tricky... He’s very tricky, the devil is, if you want to talk about it in that way. If you get closer to unveiling and coming into contact with the God within you and your true path, the devil can jump in to blame others for why you haven’t gotten there yet or faster or ever - my parents didn’t support me, my

boss is a tyrant, my spouse has his or her own designs on me, etc. In my case, my first stop into that shadowland of waking up and reflecting on how determined by others instead of self-determined I had been, was to blame the church, in certain ways the church I was serving but I didn't stop there, also the protestant mainline church that I had known all my life and the Christian church which I saw doing in certain ways a poor job at living into its call in this world... all of that was stirring in me, but pretty early on I had to face squarely and clearly that this was my problem and not anyone else's. I was not a victim in this. I had allowed, encouraged, even wanted what was on offer around me. And it was my work to figure out how to extricate myself from I needed extracting from, get clearer on what God was asking of me and come to a place where I could move forward honestly and faithfully.

I think I've figured it out, for the time being, at least. I have some "small letters" ptsd from the experience, meaning I'm frightened of falling into it again, it looms as a scary time in my past that yes made me stronger, but it was stronger than I was, that devil, and might rise up stronger again, I do not know.

Among other things, Lent is a time for humility, noting how strong and tricky the devil can be who wants us to ignore God and not hear God's call in our lives and to question the path we are uniquely called to walk down and to blame others for our struggles and to opt for comfort over the hard work of growth and change... but we come together to worship each Sunday and remember in the words of the old children's song that Jesus loves us, this we know, the Bible tells us so, and we are weak but he is strong and it is to him that we belong. That's enough to know and to hold onto in the wilderness times of our lives. He's been there before us, walks beside us, and will be there with regardless of where it all comes out.

And I think knowing that is enough.