

Sermon Lent 1C
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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It used to be said that you could learn almost everything there is to know about a person by looking at their checkbook. Well, if anyone here's like me, you don't use a checkbook much anymore, except maybe to write your weekly offering check? I do pretty much all of my financial management online. I think the old adage could be updated to say that a lot could be learned about a person by looking at their subscriptions. That could mean magazine or news subscriptions... Or other things, like satellite packages, internet services, entertainment products weekly podcasts, or maybe professional publications.

A subscription is more than just casual consumption – it implies commitment to the content, products or message delivered in the package. I can tell you right now, my life can be pretty much summed up by the following subscriptions: All Saints e-news, Charleston Magazine and Netflix. I love my church, I love my hometown, and I love watching old episodes of Friends online. Our subscriptions sum up what stories we buy into – what overarching narrative we use to frame our worldview. And we all buy into different stories – from one source or another – and the more we are out and about in the world, the more stories are going to compete for our attention and commitment.

Today in the reading from the Gospel of Luke, we hear a set of exchanges between Jesus and the Devil in the wilderness. Jesus is about to go out and begin his public ministry – gathering disciples – teaching them about his kingdom – and setting out across the countryside to spread the good news he's come to bring – but first, he undergoes this testing, a feat of strength – both physical and spiritual – to prepare him for the journey to come. This will be the test to see if, in his humanity, he can hold on to his resolve, and the truth of his divinity. What we see here in this dialogue the juxtaposition of God's story in Jesus with the Devil's story. of God's Truth vs. the Devil's truth.

The Devil's version of the truth that he lays out before Jesus is Reliance on the Flesh, Earthly Power, and Glory. This is the Devils story: You can have what you want, as much as you want, when you want it... if you just give yourself over to my ways. "If you only use your powers to prove yourself to me Jesus... then you will not be hungry." "If you only bow down and worship me, Jesus... then you will know real power." "If you only follow me to the edge...and beyond... then you will have the upper hand." The Devil's story is an IF-THEN story – IF you give in to the corrupt ways of the world, THEN you will receive power, pleasure, and satisfaction. IF you subscribe to the world's rules, THEN you will be happy.

In contrast, God's story is a SINCE-THEN story. SINCE we have a loving God, THEN HE will provide us with everything we need. SINCE we worship a powerful God, THEN he give us the strength

to overcome in Jesus' name. SINCE we have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, THEN, we are forgiven and freed to live for God alone.

The Devil comes at Jesus trying to sell him on a worldview where bowing to temptation, earthly power and the ways of darkness produce results that he claims will satisfy. Jesus has a choice. He can cave to the persuasive and sometimes overpowering story that the powers of darkness want us to believe... Or he can cling to God's word, hold fast to the his faith, and let God's story win out over the Devil's lies. In a way, that's the struggle that is lifted up by this season of Lent. During Lent, we are invited to shore up our footing as we stand firm on God's word, and stand up to the temptations of the world that strive constantly to draw us away from God.

Lent is an opportunity to re-immers ourselves in God's narrative To strip away the false narratives of the world the story of reliance on the flesh, of captivity to addictions of competing distractions... And let the story we know to be true have ROOM to take root and grow.

There are so many false narratives that threaten to drown out God's truth – whose influence over our thoughts, our actions, and our perceived realities is constantly fighting for first place in our lives. If you look around you, and really listen, you'll hear them coming from every angle, from every source – the media, from the workplace, even from trusted friends and family. No one is immune from the if-then influences from the world. It's only by increased exposure with the if-then story of God that those voices begin to grow weaker and fade. Most of the time, the stories the world is trying to sell us sneak their ways into our realities without us realizing how much power they're actually exerting over us.

Take commercialism, for example - the idea that you must have x, y and z to be happy, to be complete, to be American, for goodness sake! If you look at the success of tech companies like Apple or Facebook, you can see that it has pretty much predicated themselves, not so much on selling you products, but selling you a story about what your life should look like, and how their brand fits into that picture.

Or take the American work ethic – the idea that if you're not constantly being productive, you're slacking off. The idea that time spent on self-care is time wasted, and that you are only worth as much as what you can produce. Or a slightly different spin on that – if you're not busy, you're not doing enough. This is a narrative so many families struggle with – the push to do more, more, more... ..often to the detriment of family time, commitment to church, or just overall quality of life.

So what narrative drives your life? If you stepped back and looked, what is the overarching story your life is telling? Is it a commitment to family? to clean living? or is it the yoke of work, or social pressures, or unhealthy addictions? If you think about it, what false narratives are vying to take first place in your life, to convince you of an IF-THEN economy - to squelch out God's SINCE-THEN story – the truth that SINCE we are created in the image of a loving God, that we are free, we are loved, that we are enough?

Keeping God's truth at the center of our lives can be a perpetual struggle. Letting the truth that we are loved and valued by a faithful God be the rubric by which we order our lives is a never-ending battle. Lent is a particular time when we focus in on this struggle and let this 40-day journey toward the Festival of Christ's Resurrection be the reminder we need to return to the Lord our God, as the Prophet Joel invites us to do. This is the time when a recommitment to our personal devotions, to reading God's Word, attending the Lenten series or taking on the Haiku discipline, choosing to adopt a spiritual practice for this season, or simply allowing the spirit of this reflective season to bring faith back into central place become the tools we use to help pry away the false stories that try to hem us in or obscure our ability to hear and trust God's story.

A lot can be learned about a person by what it is they subscribe to. And I think that is true not only for our material subscriptions, but our spiritual ones as well. Our lives tell a story – they tell the story of what we subscribe to – the beliefs, the preconceptions, and the defeats that we buy into – these are what people see when they encounter and interact with us. So what story are we telling? Because that's our witness – the way we live out the narratives we subscribe to – that's what people see us acting out in the world. Are we going to be a people that tells the story of the triumph of the world of the pressures of wealth, power and the flesh? Or will our lives tell a story of the victory of God? When people see our deeds – as individuals – as a church – will they give glory to the ways of the world? or will they give glory to our Father in heaven?

As I think about us here at All Saints, I can already think of ways that we are reshaping the narrative by living out God's SINCE-THEN story. If the world's story tells us that our worth is only as great as our work ethic, that IF we just work hard enough, just make enough, THEN our lives will have value. But through our work to better the lives of the aging and those living with dementia, we are telling a different story. Respite Care is one way that we participate in that reshaping. When individuals and caregivers come to Respite Care, when they are welcomed in, and engaged in conversation, and fed with nutritious meals as well as with life enrichment opportunities, they experience a SINCE-THEN reality: SINCE you are a beloved child of God, SINCE you are a member of this community, THEN, you are worth taking care of, your life has meaning and inherent value.

Another way we at All Saints participate in reshaping the narrative is through our work at Windwood Farms. The children who spend time at Windwood might hear the message that they are not welcome, that they don't belong, or even don't deserve love. But when our volunteers show up with their favorite meal, and sit down with them at the dinner table, or just spend time listening to the boys, or playing a game, or helping them work through their homework, they're reshaping the narrative of belonging. They're reminding them that no matter what difficulties they've had at home, or in school, or struggle with every day, that they are loved. Period. End of Story. (PAUSE) Together, we are building a story – A story of what God can do when we place our time, talents, treasures, and our trust in his hands – a story of unconventional friendships and unexpected joy. A story of generosity of

resources and of generosity of spirit. A story where, despite all odds, God's grace triumphs in the face of temptation, pressures, busy-ness or apathy.

This Lent, we will be focusing on the theme: Christ-Centered Community. Like we asked ourselves on Ash Wednesday: How can our church take on the shape of the cross? How can we allow everything that we do, and say, and believe, as the Community of All Saints, be Centered on Christ, and Centered by his Sacrificial Ways?

As we walk together along this 40-day journey of Lent, as we enter into this spiritual wilderness, may we, as we journey to Golgotha, keep our eyes focused on the cross, keep the cruciform shape of love at our center, so that we, like Jesus, will emerge triumphant over the temptation to cave to the Devil's false narratives. This season, may ours be a striving to live more and more into the call to be a Christ-Centered and Cross-Shaped Community, so that our words, and our actions and all that we do, with the help of Christ, who strengthens us, will be a constant telling, re-telling, and a celebration of the Story of God's Love.