



**Plymouth Congregational Church**  
**2001 E. Grand River Avenue**  
**Lansing, MI 48912**

January 22, 2012

## **FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT**

### **“ALL ALONE”**

Rev. Joy A. Baumgartner, Interim Senior Minister

#### **GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 3:13-4:2**

Most often, we read this scripture chosen this morning and stop at the Baptism. We don't want to continue. We want an idyllic view of Jesus at that baptismal site – a halo over his head, the spirit descending like a dove. No complications. Certainly, no human frailty.

The truth, however, is that the story does continue. Just as we settle down with a divine image of Jesus, we are thrust into the facts of life. Jesus enters the wilderness. And Matthew tells us he faced temptation. He had to face all the difficult questions of faith, and find his own answers. He fasted, he was hungry and the temptation went on.

This is the kind of story that raises more questions than almost any other in Jesus' ministry – and it's just the beginning! It opens a can of worms and makes us wonder “why?” First, we wonder, “What does God have to do with temptation?” What is the relationship between God's spirit and the temptation – or evil? Is God present in our pain and struggle? How does Jesus experience God during this time? Did those ill-fated words of the Psalmist, “My God, my God, why?” come to mind already then?

And there is that section where God calls Jesus his “beloved Son.” Don't we all want that? Don't we all want somehow to feel and hear God saying to us, “You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter?” If the Spirit brought a

message that Jesus was in fact his beloved Son, why would Jesus need to prove his obedience – or loyalty? And why would Matthew tell the story in this way? And how do we know this story anyway? Did Jesus tell the disciples of his struggle? How was this story passed on?

Forty days in our lifetime, when we live longer and longer, may seem like a very short time. But think of 40 days and 40 nights in agony, loneliness, hunger and deprivation. That's a very long time. We have all been there at times, and we know the more pain or loneliness involved, the slower time seems to move. And in this story, Jesus wasn't eating. Most of us have known short periods of trouble or grief, but 40 days without interruption or comfort? Was it necessary for Jesus to go through this? What is the purpose?

Like most of you I really want to think of Jesus as Godly and divine. God's son. We are uncomfortable with a frail, hurting or uncertain Jesus. In one of his writings, Dr. Carlyle Marney tells us that the one real heresy of Christian faith is that "We never let Jesus' feet touch the ground. We never let Jesus become truly human."

Well, here we see it – the humanness of Jesus. Tempted, in pain, struggling, hungry – that's human. Whether we call it temptation, testing or trial, it is real and the real message here is that there is struggle in life for all of us. We struggle, we weigh the alternatives and options, consider the consequences, make decisions and choices. That's life! Life as we live it day in and day out, whether Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu, or with no formal recognition of God. All of us, and sometimes I think especially people of faith it seems, are not immune. Faith in God does not exempt is from trial and temptation – even Jesus.

It is significant that this particular story appears in all three synoptic Gospels – each author including it, albeit for different reasons. And notice it came after the Baptism, not before. After he claimed, adopted and announced his belief, God's claim on him, then the testing began! We really know little of Jesus' life before the Baptism. Son of a carpenter. A child lost in the city. That's about all. But after, with God

guiding him, there is turmoil, misunderstanding, confusion, struggle. Once he became aware of his possibilities, of the good and evil in the world, the creativity and destructiveness, and his own responsibility in all that, then the true struggle began. Life before Baptism must have seemed so simple. And isn't that true for each and every one of us?

It is after Baptism, after Confirming our faith or giving our lives over to Christ and realizing what it means to truly follow Christ, to be a true child of God, that we discover the true journey – turmoil and celebration.

In truth, every day of our lives we find ourselves wishing we could avoid pain, hoping nothing will happen to intrude on our lives, longing for peace and tranquility that will release our anxieties. But you see, if we live as Jesus lived, we recognize our struggle as a way of knowing, feeling, testing and finding the realities of life. The story is about finding our constant companion – our God. It is about discovering once and for all, in all our struggles, that we are not alone and then , we cannot turn back, just as Jesus had to forge ahead.

Faulkner spoke of accepting humanity when he accepted a Nobel prize for literature and said, "Man not only will endure, he will prevail!" Henry Ward Beecher once said, "God asks no one whether or not he will accept life. That is not our choice. The only choice is how?"

It's the how we learn from Jesus. He came out of the wilderness, after enduring all those difficult moments and questions, and began his ministry. He endured and prevailed and went about the business not only of doing his own ministry, but recruiting others to follow. He had to get help. Even Jesus couldn't do this alone – he began to recruit, taught by example, told stories, lessons, caused them to question the traditions and rituals of the past, and led them to a time when they would have to take over the responsibility for their lives and the lives of those who would follow. He taught them to do whatever was necessary to get through those temptation times – and go beyond.

Each Sunday as we gather to worship God, we discover that this time is a true gift. It is a time to rethink our beliefs, to ask tough questions, to look carefully at the life of Jesus and ask ourselves, “Who is this Jesus in my life?” “Do I feel God’s presence, really?” “How can I find a deeper relationship with God and with others during this time?”

Whether old or young, rich or poor, we all must travel the road if we are to follow Christ. It comes suddenly at times – a phone call in the night. Sometimes just walking into a room can change our life forever. At times, it’s nothing definite – no trauma or crisis – just utter confusion or fear. And sometimes we just feel so alone.

Several years ago I was working with a Confirmation class and came to know the young people really well. I noticed that one girl was always cutting up – laughing, talking not listening, drawing pictures - anything but being part of the class. One day as we completed our time together, I asked them each to write a short description of how they felt god in their lives, just to focus them on what we were really about. I told them they could leave their responses on my desk as they left.

It didn’t seem to take any of them very long to complete their assignment. And when everyone was gone, or at least I thought they were gone, I went into my office and began to read. There were textbook correct answers, thoughtful answers, but the one that stood out on the page was Peggy’s. It read, “God has left me. He has left me all alone, there is no one else. I am all alone.”

I sat there staring at the paper when I heard a sound and standing in my doorway was a red-faced weeping child Peggy. She stood there crying – alone. I went to her and when I reached out, she fell into my arms. She cried and poured out the story of all the pain, the loneliness, all the ways she felt shut out and unaccepted by her family, people at school, even her friends. She finished her story saying, “I’m just so alone.”

I held her for a while, stroked her head and wiped her tears and said, “It might feel that way, but you’re not alone,

Peggy. I'm here now. And lots of other people here love you. But even when I'm not with you, God is there and God really cares about you." She looked up at me, with tears still falling and asked, "How do I know?" How does she know?

How would you answer that question? I simply said, "Because you are here. Because somehow you thought to come to me. Somehow you knew to write your pain. Somehow you knew. Could that be God?"

Peggy, Linda, Sam, Judy, James, Tom- you are not alone. You are not alone! If there is one thing to learn from this one we call Jesus, and from the Church of Jesus Christ is this: We are not alone! Amen.