

The Element of Exposure

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Texts: Matthew 4: 1-11

So, I've been thinking lately about different kinds of "exposure." Don't worry, this isn't about Covid exposure. It's not about exposure to the elements given our frigid though finally seasonal recent weather. It's a little deeper than that. I've also been thinking a lot this last week about truth-tellers. I can't wait for you all to see the new portraits hanging around the building. And, lastly, I've been considering our Lenten theme: The Truth that Sets us Free; Contemplation and Courage for the Common Good. On one level, horrific headlines are constantly inundating our screens. I wonder if we many of us aren't suffering from an *overexposure* to all the harsh truths about our world and planet. I mean...*can't we just tune it out, at least for a time?* At another level, I worry that we may equally suffer from a sort of *underexposure* to truth, or maybe just an unwillingness to trust and share in a kind of truth that I know has the power to heal us and lead us to a better place. *Can't we all just tune in and listen more deeply to ourselves, each other and God?*

All of these themes were already swirling in my mind when I awoke on Wednesday morning. It's an occupational hazard I call "sermon on the brain." It was Ash Wednesday, and as I often do at the beginning of Lent, I pulled Martin Smith's "Season for the Spirit" off my shelf and started reading it. It was just for me this year, or so I thought! And yet his words could not have been more in tune with our Lenten theme which I promise you emerged weeks ago at a brainstorming session of staff and lay leaders. Hear what Smith writes, as if on cue for First Church and for this Lent: "Lent is the season for the Spirit of truth, who drove Jesus into the wilderness to initiate him into the truth that sets free!" And a bit later into his reflection: "Lent is about the freedom that is gained only through exposure to the truth." The Greek word for truth *aletheia* literally means "unhiddenness." Truth is not a thing, it is rather an event." Smith say "Truth happens to us when the coverings of illusion are stripped away and what is real emerges into the open. The truth we are promised if we live the demands of this season consists not in new furniture for the mind but in exposure to the reality of God's presence in ourselves and the world. The Spirit promises to bring us into truth by stripping away some ... of the insulation and barriers that have separated us from living contact with reality—the reality of God, of God's world, and of our true selves"¹. And there it is. With those powerful words, welcome to Lent, everyone!

The theme of exposure is implicit in today's reading. Here we find Jesus, just after his baptism by John in the Jordan, just after that moment where he simultaneously receives the blessing of the Spirit naming him as beloved, and where he recognizes his solidarity with the crowd of others in the river with him. Still wet behind the ears, and just before he begins his public ministry, we learn that he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and there he fasted forty days and forty nights and was tempted by the devil. First, I've been to that wilderness, literally, on several pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Each time, I've been awe-struck by the harsh, rocky, desolate landscapes just outside and between the villages, towns, and cities there. When we think of wilderness in these parts, we tend to think of forests. Forget that! This is rugged, often mountainous, yet utterly desert terrain with barely a

¹ Smith, Martin L. A Season for the Spirit (pp. 13-14). Church Publishing Incorporated. Kindle Edition.

shoot of vegetation. And so, our scene is set in this context of profound physical exposure, and this is precisely where Jesus encounters the mysterious, shadowy forces of human temptation. Theologian and scholar Matt Boulton sounds a helpful note of caution here. He writes: “A common way of interpreting Jesus’ temptation is to cast him as a kind of hero, stoically and piously resisting lures to comfort (*You’re hungry — so go ahead, eat!*), security (*Prove you’re God’s beloved — let God rescue you!*), and glory (*All this can be yours!*). By resisting such things, Jesus supposedly demonstrates his fortitude.” But, Boulton writes, “Matthew’s story actually points in a quite different direction: not toward close-fisted fortitude, but rather toward open-handed, open-hearted, humble, humbling trust.” I wonder...can we see this? Can we see how Jesus is no hero here? This story isn’t intended as some extraordinary example of willpower! It’s not that at all. Boulton makes it clear: “The devil tempts Jesus *toward* his “fortitude” and “self-sufficiency,” at least as the world often defines them (sustain yourself, prove yourself, rule the world!). But Jesus declines to pursue this path. [Instead, and in essence, he testifies] to his “insufficiency” apart from God.”²

You see...Jesus already knows what we so readily neglect or forget, that his every day and every breath is a gift from God. He can’t even pretend to rely solely on himself! And because he so deeply trusts in God, leans into God, and relies on God as the ground of his being, and the source of every blessing, he already has everything he needs. And the truth is, so do we! Through the pain of his hunger, the wilderness of his loneliness, the shadows of death starting to close in around him, he never loses sight of or trust in the light of God’s love for him and the world. It’s about his stalwart trust in a deeper truth!

How does he do it? Through prayerful and ongoing exposure to and contemplation of God’s word in scripture, by remembering and believing in the spiritual reality of his baptismal belovedness and solidarity with all creatures, he already has the freedom to live his life, humbly and without fear. Stepping back, the passage itself exposes an uncomfortable truth for us all. For how often do we find ourselves succumbing to the delusions of our own self-reliance, wisdom and strength? No wonder we feel *overexposed* to it all if we feel like are carrying it alone! Yet imagine, trusting, as Jesus did, even and especially in those moments of isolation and temptation.

Ok. That was a lot! So, let’s mix it up for a bit. I wonder, how many of you are photographers or have taken even an intro class? I took a ½ year elective in high school, long before the days of digital cameras, smartphones, and photoshop. It was a semester of loading 35 mm film into my dad’s old Nikon, choosing the right lens, and snapping shots of stuff I thought looked cool! I’d spend third periods and lunch breaks in the school’s “dark room.” I hated the smell of the chemicals, but I loved the process of developing prints from negatives. Sadly, I don’t remember much from the class. Shout out to Wikipedia and a quick call yesterday with Gaylen, our resident professional photographer, for confirming what comes next. In terms of photography, exposure is the amount of light that reaches the surface of an image sensor or a frame of film. It relies on two things: aperture and shutter speed. Aperture is the size of the lens opening that controls how much light the camera lets in. Shutter speed measures how long the aperture stays open. Think of a photo of long streaks of tail lights on a highway. That’s due to a slower shutter speed! Without the right aperture or shutter speed, photos can be either overexposed, and washed out in too much light, or underexposed, and so too dark to make out the subject. What’s more, there’s a similar process and risk that can play out later, after the shot is taken, but when photographers develop prints in a dark room. It’s all about the light, right?

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/trust-saltlectionary-commentary-lent-1-year-a>

Back to Jesus and his example for us for Lent! Jesus is never underexposed to the reality or light of God's love and so, I'd bet, he never feels truly overexposed to those harsh and crushing truths of our world! His spiritual aperture is just right, the speed is set neither too fast nor slow. Like a great photographer, he can see clearly and unflinchingly the truth of the world as it is, in all its pain and glory, but he always catches it in the bright and radiant perfect light of God's love! What's more, once he's got the images in his heart, especially when he is feeling low on film, he goes to the desert, to the garden. He retreats in prayer to a proverbial first-century dark room where he lets the Spirit take the time it needs to develop what he takes in and to enlarge it into a more beautiful image for all the world to see! From that first encounter with truth, through a prayerful developmental process of contemplation and courage, he himself emerges and rises again and again, with his life and ministry as all the more a blessing. And the same can be true for us!

And here I'm reminded too of that powerful quote that Ahmaad and Carla shared in a recent session about Harriet Jacobs, who was enslaved as a girl, escaped and spent 7 years hiding from her ruthless enslaver, Dr. Flint, in a tiny crawl space under the roof of her grandmother's house. Jacobs writes: "I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children. The first person I saw in the street was Dr. Flint. I had a shuddering, superstitious feeling that it was a bad omen. Several familiar faces passed by. At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to tell them I was there!"

Jacobs herself later calls that blessed tiny bored hole in the wall an "aperture"! By the grace of God, that lens, that loophole of retreat as she called it, allowed her just enough light to see through those deeply torturous years. Meanwhile, her long days in prayer, weaving, watching, reading the Bible, witnessing life through the cracks from that small, dark space were a time of profound spiritual formation and development that allowed her to issue forth a testament of grace and truth-telling whose healing powers are just now coming to light for many of us.

In our lives, even in Lent, yes, there is a risk of overexposure to the ways we both take in and tell truths that are hard to hear! And yet there is a companion risk of underexposure when we stop trusting that God's light and love, even a sliver of it, gives us all we truly need. The question for us is how can we trust each other and Spirit to help us to set our own spiritual apertures and shutter speeds so we too can capture what we are being invited to take in each day? And how can we carve out time in dark or quiet spaces of prayer to let the Spirit's mysterious process of development unfold within us? We may not even know when this is happening. The spirit may be at work in you in even now – developing all of your negatives! This is how it works! This is how the truth sets us and every captive free! If we can turn from our habituated self-reliance, turn from our to comfort and distraction and security and glory all of which betray our trust in God, we too can tune in and raise up reflections of God's truth that will lead our souls and others to collective freedom and liberation, justice and joy!

After church today, and throughout the coming weeks, we have the opportunity to stand before the portraits of 11 remarkable truth-tellers, including Harriet Jacobs, to gaze at their eyes, to encounter their stories of courage and struggle, and hope! And there is this one behind me [point to banner of dark-skinned Palestinian Jesus], who I believe knows the way, the truth, and life! As we stand before all of

them and the Spirit in this Lenten season upon us, I pray we feel ready and inspired to fully expose our lives, our souls, our stories, our hidden truths to their light and love.

Together let's learn from their passions for peace and healing and justice and from their models, so that we ourselves and can so pattern our lives, bear our wounds, speak the truth of our own stories to the world.

I close with these three lines from a favorite Hindu prayer:

“From the unreal lead me to the real
From darkness lead me to light
From death lead me to deathlessness!”

And this:

God, from the untruths of our lives and world,
lead us to your truth, that we may all be free! Amen

