

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: February 12, 2012
Sermon Title: What's Coming?
Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

These are odd Sundays. There is a big event at the 9 AM service, the Children's Choir musical. But there is still our 10:30 service; you have come here to worship. There is no Children's Choir musical, and you still need a sermon! So I decided to catch you up on some church life ahead, sort of one long announcement as a sermon!

We begin with the obvious: Lent. Lent is the seven weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter, and Ash Wednesday is in 10 days. Lent has lots of meaning and traditions, and it's based on the very beginnings of Jesus and his public ministry. The Bible tells us that Jesus went to the Jordan River, was baptized by his cousin John the Baptist, and then headed out into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting, testing, temptations; 40 days of looking deep inside himself, trying to decide who he really was, what he stood for, and how to go about it. Forty days of self-denial, deep introspection, and wrestling with the Devil.

We start Lent with Ash Wednesday, a brutally frank reminder of our mortality. The ashes are a blunt statement, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," "From dust we came, to dust we shall return." It's almost poetic, but it's meant to be blunt. We are mortal. Our time will come. We all die one day. So be ready. Lent is a time to get ready. Jesus used his 40 days to get ready, to get ready for life and death. Lent invites us to get ready.

I didn't know doctors still talk like this, but I've had people quote their doctors, even nowadays, saying, "You need to put your house in order." That's another blunt way to say, "Get ready." The other emotional power of Lent is Holy Week. It takes us on a roller-coaster ride of emotions, from the joyous Palm Sunday celebration, with crowds shouting "Hallelujah ... Hosanna," cheering Jesus and the Disciples like the New York Giants' parading through Manhattan.

We've all been there, moments of triumph, euphoria, delight; the "mountaintop," we call it. But if you've ever really looked around when you're on a mountaintop, you know the valleys are all around you, close by.

For Jesus, the joy of Palm Sunday passed quickly. By Thursday of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Jesus is betrayed, denied, forsaken, ignored, left flat, arrested. Within hours, he is beaten, tortured, mocked, and murdered. He's dead. His life's journey is over. All the hopes invested in him are dashed. His friends, his followers, his believers ... no longer believe. The Apostles' Creed says, "He descended into hell," a personal, physical, spiritual, psychological hell. Theologically, he paid for our sins, a hellish price to pay.

And then comes Easter! Glorious, glorious Easter, with the world turned upside down, the laws of nature, of science, health, logic, all turned on their heads. Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, dead Jesus who had descended into hell ... that same Jesus was alive! And in between is Lent, a time to get ready. Our Scripture lesson follows Jesus, "led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil." In other words, this was God's plan.

Not coincidence. Happenstance. Luck. This was God's plan. Life includes wilderness, and we face it head-on. That's what Jesus did in the wilderness. He faced his demons, he sought out his destiny.

Native Americans call it the "vision quest." You go off by yourself. You give up things, all the pleasures and routines and distractions and comforts of life. You give that up and go way, way out till the clouds start to look like food, and the voices sound like the Devil, and you're tempted, tested, pushed ... till you find out what's at your core. The Bible tells us the Devil came to Jesus, offered enticements, inducements, temptation. Jesus was offered immediate gratification, exciting thrills, incredible power. Hungry, Jesus was offered food. Just starting his ministry, Jesus was offered proof that God was on his side. Here to die on the cross, Jesus was offered the world on a silver platter. It was all so easy, so attractive. So ... so tempting.

And Jesus beat back temptation. Jesus stood tall. "Man does not live by bread alone," he said, "do not put the Lord your God to the test ... get thee behind me, Satan." I don't need the easy way, Jesus is saying, I don't need cheap thrills. I need to live ... and die ... and live again. That's Lent, learning what it means to live, learning how to live better, learning how to face our own mortality, to climb the mountaintop, to go into the valleys, even "the valley of the shadow of death ... and fear no evil." That's Lent.

So historically, churches and church people put more into Lent than the rest of the year — more attendance, more services, more special programs, more spiritual effort. In the old days, people gave something up for Lent — chocolate, smoking, cursing, sex. How many of you remember Lenten dime folders and quarter folders? Little cardboard folders with little slits in them, 40 slits for 40 quarters for the so-called 40 days of Lent. And each day you put a quarter in the slot, representing the money you saved by not buying a snack or a cigarette; or the penalty you paid for each Lenten vow you broke, each chocolate you ate or swear word you used. Then you brought the Lenten quarter folders to church on Easter, a sort of visual statement of the sacrifice you made during Lent.

My father used to preach, "Anything you should give up for Lent, you probably should give up for life; and anything you could give up for Lent, you could give up for life!" In other words, Lent was a great way to break a bad habit. You've heard me tell of how I quit smoking. I tell it every Lent. Six or so years ago, Elizabeth Starr came to church on Ash Wednesday, and after the service she said, "I gave up smoking for Lent," and without even thinking, I told her, "If you can do it, I can do it," and we kept each other motivated for six and a half weeks. And that was that. Haven't smoked since.

Lent is a good time to do exactly what Jesus did. Confront your demons. Or in more modern terms, what are your weak spots? Your vulnerabilities? What tempts you? What do you have a hard time controlling? Or, what controls you that shouldn't? Jesus was willing to find out. He looked into the mirror of his soul to determine if he was ready to do what God needed him to do. In that regard, Jesus was no different from us. We all have something God wants us to be, to do. What temptations, vulnerabilities, call them "demons" if you like, what gets in the way of your being what God wants you to be? What should you give up ... change, fix, or do?

That's the sort of classic 20th-century Lent. Give something up to emulate Christ that actually benefits you. Here at Greenfield Hill, we added another twist. Why not *take something up* for Lent, start a new habit, actually do something that's good for you? Read the Bible daily. Exercise. Eat healthy. Do a "random act of kindness." Try and new spiritual discipline, something you always wanted to try but you never got to it.

For a lot of people, that is prayer. Prayer is like the famous saying about the weather, "Everybody talks about it, and nobody can do anything about it." I'm serious. I don't think there is any religious topic that gets more talked about than prayer. Even in a church service, we have six, seven, eight prayers every service: invocation prayer, silent prayer, pastoral prayer, the Lord's Prayer, the choir's prayer response, the offering dedication prayer, and often one of the hymns is a prayer. If the hymn is directed at God, that's a prayer: "How Great Thou Art," "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," "My Jesus, I Love Thee," "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Just As I Am." All hymns sung to God — thus, prayers!

Yet, most people are flummoxed by prayer. What is it? How to do it? What words to use? Do you need all those "thees" and "thous"? Or can you talk plainly? Any topics off limits? Right now, this very minute, if I called on you and told you to give our closing prayer, how many of you would have a heart attack? Well, let's do with prayer what Jesus did with the Devil: tackle it head-on.

So for Lent 2012, prayer is front and center. There will be at least two sermons on prayer, and this one doesn't count. Our Thursday Bible Study will be about prayer. We've scheduled a midweek "Living Room" worship focused just on the Lord's Prayer. But perhaps most intriguingly, we've announced our Greenfield Hill Church first annual ever Prayer Breakfast! And folks are already worried! What the heck is a "prayer breakfast"? Are we just going to pray the whole hour? For some it seems either boring or frightening or silly. In place of the 9 o'clock service? In the Memorial Room? Over a

platter of bacon, while munching on a bagel? "Unappetizing," you're thinking. Undignified. Un-worship, un-breakfast, un-prayer.

Try it, you'll like it! Let me lay it out for you. On Sunday morning, March 18, you can walk into the sanctuary, and Alida will have a full-scale, traditional Sunday worship: hymns, sermon, the works, just as you're used to or ... you can walk into the Memorial Room, sit down, have a full breakfast, enjoy your coffee, with prayer blended into the breakfast like cheese in an omelet. Seriously.

Marcia, our Christian Education Director, came up with a great name for this event: "Breakfast as Worship." We're going to have breakfast. It will be worship. And you'll learn more about prayer and varieties of prayer, experience of prayer than you ever imagined. Breakfast as Worship. Breakfast as Prayer. Prayer Breakfast. Call it what you will, it will be fun, it will be interesting. And probably we could all use a little boost in our prayer life.

Do you remember how we got "The Lord's Prayer" in the first place? The Disciples went to Jesus and begged him, "Lord, teach us to pray!" (Luke 11) The first official saints in all of Christianity, some of the holiest men in history. Jesus's handpicked Disciples, and even they needed help to pray.

I literally wrote that last sentence on Friday night at 10:30 while watching TV, a New York City Tom Selleck cop show called "Blue Bloods." A young Jewish woman was told by God during a morning jog that her stepfather had killed her mother. She returned home to find it true. For the next hour, all the array of police detectives, rookie cops, D.A.'s, and priests processed what it means to be in communication with God. What does it mean to talk to God or hear from God? What does it mean to pray? And how do you test it?

The Disciples were just as flummoxed! So Luke 11 says, "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of them said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John the Baptist taught his disciples." We usually think that John the Baptist was famous for baptizing, but it turns out he was a great teacher of prayer!

Well, we plan to use Lent to teach about prayer: by example, by practice, by teaching and preaching, and even by breakfast.

So there you have it. Announcements as sermon. Breakfast as worship. Lent as prayer. And you're invited!

