

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
15 January 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Second Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Famished, Yet Faithful”

Second Sermon in Series, *Pace & Practice* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 4:1-17

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: This manuscript is simply that, a manuscript. A sermon is a spoken word event. This merely served as a guide for the sermon; only about half of this material was preached in the moment of the sermon itself. And many of the words were changed and paragraphs shortened. But the general gist of the content remains the same.

Last week we learned that Jesus, even as the Son of God, is not exempt from baptism and blessing. And this week we learn that Jesus, even as the Son of God, is not exempt from trials and temptations.

Like us, Jesus needs affirmation and blessing because like us, Jesus has hungers and hard times. Just like us, Jesus’ life is not a linear upward trajectory of success; it is a rollercoaster of ups and downs. Like the prophets before him, and like his disciples that will follow, Jesus must navigate the highs and lows of his life with faithfulness.

And think about this moment in time for him. Jesus has just been baptized – it’s a high point for anyone in their spiritual journey and yet Jesus is sent straight from the renewing waters into the rough wilderness. Do you know what we call that? Whiplash.

That’s right. Even Jesus gets tossed and turned – it’ll happen again later in his ministry in a boat during a dark and stormy night, but it happens right here on dry ground in the desert daylight too. It happens with his disciples; it happens when he’s alone. It happens before his ministry even begins, and it will happen even after he’s risen from the dead. From the moment he leapt around with his cousin John the Baptist in the wombs of their mothers, to the moment Jesus is lifted up by the Spirit of God as he ascends into heaven – nothing is smooth sailing for our Savior.

So if it’s not smooth sailing for Jesus – the Son of God – then why do we always think it will be for us?

It has me thinking about this curiosity: I wonder if it’s because the Pace of Life is so Unpredictable, that perhaps that’s why it’s so important that

we try and create some predictability to the Practices of our Faith.

Morning Devotional
Afternoon Yoga
Evening Journaling

Worship on Sundays
Bible Study on Tuesdays
Serving others on Saturdays

Pray before meals.
Silence during commute.
Breathing after meetings.

And yet whatever the rhythm and particularities of *your* spiritual practices, if you've practiced them long enough – you know that even *they* cannot save you from falling or failing. Like our lives, the pace of our faith journey is as predictable as the weather patterns across the front range. Which is to say – not very.

News flash: Having Faith will not make your life easy. And, in fact, Being Faithful will most assuredly make your life harder. This is, of course, because the faith Jesus invites us to is not about ease or comfort or maintaining the status quo; it's about disrupting and transforming and healing. And those are hard things. But – we can do hard things. We can!

Let's look at today's text. Matthew tells us that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Fasting is a powerful spiritual practice that has been around for ages. It has many forms, but essentially it breaks unconscious patterns of being to help us become conscious of God's presence in our lives and our need and utter dependence on God. It is not a passive practice, but takes deep prayer and discipline and so here we see Jesus – freshly blessed from the waters of baptism – and to top it off he's engaged in this intense spiritual practice of fasting for forty days and forty nights!

Jesus is arguably in the best “spiritual shape” of his life in terms of being in tune with God and faith and he hasn't even started his ministry yet so he can't be burnt out – and yet it's in *this* moment – that Matthew tells us: Jesus is famished.
Famished!

Matthew does not say Jesus is full of faith. Or feeling great. He does not say Jesus is in “tune with God” or “at peace in his life.” Matthew says Jesus is *famished*. Depleted. Hungering. Without energy. Wanting for

nourishment, for hope, for something – for anything.

And yet, we see that even as Jesus is famished, he is faithful.

Famished, yet faithful.

His Israelite ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai wandered for 40 years in search of the Promised Land, and you'll remember that they faced the same temptations (in the same order) that Jesus did.

Unlike Jesus who refused to turn a stone into bread because he was hungry, the Israelites did not trust God would provide and complained of their hunger – eventually God gave them manna to gather each day (Exodus 16).

Unlike Jesus who would not jump off a pinnacle just to prove God's protection and presence, the Israelites wanted proof that God was with them and they would not stop grumbling or complaining or putting God (via Moses) to the test. Moses had to strike a rock so the people could see water flowing out to know God was with them. (Exodus 17).

And unlike Jesus, who would not bow down and worship the

devil just to be able to have the power of all the kingdoms at his fingertips, the Israelites struggled with false idols and false worship, even building a golden calf because they were tired of waiting on God (Exodus 32).

Where the Israelites faltered, Jesus was faithful. Both the Israelites and Jesus were in the wilderness. Both the Israelites and Jesus were famished, in need, at their wits' end. So what was the difference? Why did Israel prove faithless while Jesus remained faithful?

Well, the difference seems to be spiritual practices. Jesus went internal and connected more deeply with himself and God. And it seems that most of what the Israelites did was complain and grumble. And nothing against them – they had to find a way to cope after all ...40 years is a long time...but their coping skills of complaining did not help them be more faithful. It just made them more frustrated.

The Israelites complained about external circumstances. Jesus took care to tend to his interior life, his soul. And I think this shift is so key – now more than ever.

What a difference. Jesus had been fasting and praying – and – he clearly had been worshipping in the Temple his whole life because he knew the Scriptures well enough to quote them by heart. His practices of fasting, prayer, and studying scripture – equipped him to be faithful – even when famished.

And you know what? Brace yourself. I'm not sure we are ever *not* going to be famished, my friends. At least not this side of heaven. I keep thinking about how tired I am and that it must still be some kind of post-COVID, post-shut down weird and warped view of time and my energy and limits, and the divisiveness of our politics and how the true is changing and never going to be the same again – and I think all of that is true – but all I think all that these external realities have done is reveal what's been inside of us all along. We are a famished people From the days of the Israelites to today, we are famished. And all the lures of “quick fixes” for hunger, healing, and harnessing power – they have failed us, haven't they? Whatever time we are living in, it is nothing if not bewildering Wilderness, right?

As long as the kin-dom of God is not yet here, then we are going to be working for it – all the while still living in systems that oppress and restrict, demean and dehumanize – and desensitize. And in any given moment, we may be the oppressor or we may be the oppressed – but either way – as long as there are those who have food and those who hunger, as long as there are those who are saved or healed and those who still yet suffer and die, as long as there are those who have power and wealth and kingdoms and those who do not have those things – then we are living in an broken, dysfunctional system. A system that does not serve all. A system that puts some people above other people. A system that names some as worthy and others as unworthy. Or as we might hear it more bluntly: some people work hard, others are lazy; some people have a right to be here, others do not.

As long as we are in such a system – a system that would have us believe that our worth is based on what we produce rather than who we are – then we will be famished. *Famished*. Because in this system if we are the “haves,” then we'll be constantly trying to protect what we have. And if we are the

“have nots,” then we will be constantly trying to gain what we do not have. Both are exhausting. Both make little gods (idols) out of Provision, Protection, and Power – gods we must appease and worship...rather than experiencing Provision, Protection, and Power as free flowing gifts from God, abundantly blessing all – *us* included!

And this system that keeps us famished is exactly how the devil wants it. The devil, or *diabolos* in Greek, means “slanderer” or “accuser,” by the way. The roots of *diabolos* literally means “to throw apart” or “cast across.” The devil is any Thing or any One or any Thought or any System that casts itself across the vision of God’s kin-dom, blinding us to its glory. The devil is any Thing or any One or any Thought or any System that throws us apart from one another – pushing us to sides – causing division through accusation or falsities or lies.

We live in a famished and famishing world – and the *Diabolos* makes us think this is just the way things have to be. So it’s no wonder that we are famished.

And your famishing may look like being exhausted from parenting through a trying season, or being depleted from battling a never ending illness, or grieving to the point you can’t get out of bed, or wallowing in shame or regret from doing something you should not have done, or spinning in anxiety about something that might (or might not) happen in the future, or having doubt about whether or not you have enough faith.

The feelings of being famished are not just collective and common to us all, they are individual and unique to each one of us too.

But whatever your hunger as an individual and whatever our collective famishing as a country and world – the Good News is that even though you are famished, you can still yet be faithful. In fact! It is precisely the feeling of being famished – that lets you know you *are* faithful. That the way the world is now is not the way the world has to be forever. That the kin-dom of God has still not yet come.

Jesus was famished, yet faithful.

And even though we too are famished, we are God's people, and we are called to be faithful.

The lesson of today's text is not that Jesus was full of faith. It's that Jesus was faithful to the practices that helped him hold on to his faith in hard times...in times of testing and temptation.

This is hopeful to me. Because it shows me that we do spiritual practices not for the present moment per se, but for a future moment when we don't even know we will need them. Jesus probably didn't know that all growing up as a boy when he was going to Temple and hearing the scriptures read that those would be the food that would keep him faithful in the wilderness.

Often we do not know when or how our spiritual practices will pay off, or if they ever will, but we do them not because we are expecting a pay off – but because they provide a framework from which we can live as famished, yet faithful people.

And sometimes it feels like we'll never catch a break, doesn't it?

Well, the same is true for Jesus.

Even after Jesus passed these three tests in the wilderness – you'd think maybe he'd get a break, a chance for some reprieve. But he doesn't. Life happens. His friend, his predecessor, his cousin – the one who paved the way for his life and ministry – John the Baptist – is arrested. By the powers that be. By powers that are threatened by a message of repentance – a message of mind-changing and society-shifting. John is arrested. And Jesus finds himself still famished...this time with grief.

So he paces himself. He withdraws to Galilee. He needs time. Withdrawing is not unfaithfulness. Withdrawing is finding pace and practice as a means of faithfulness. We cannot live with fullness of faith and we cannot carry out God's call on our lives, building and creating the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven – unless we take care of ourselves. We must feed our souls, our spirits. Our spiritual practices will not take away our physical or cultural or societal hungers or famines – but they will nourish our souls so that even as we are famished, we are still faithful.

Had he not been assassinated for his prophetic voice and disruptive action, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been 94 years old today. While King's activism was peaceful and non-violent, there is nothing peaceful about the inner work it takes for us to violate the comforts and conditions that keep inequities and as the status quo. We must disrupt the lies we carry about how the world must work. And we must believe instead of the vision King proclaimed: That it doesn't have to be this way. That black bodies do not have to be discarded. That brown citizenship does not have to be denied. That indigenous lands do not have to be degraded. That poor people do not have to live in perpetual poverty. That houseless folks do not have to forever beg for dignity and dinner and decent shelter.

Can we imagine a different world? Can we dream it? I dare say that none of us believes that the way the world is today is the way God wants the world to be for us. So we must keep keeping on. But how to do we do this? By caring for our souls, even as we march to save the world.

Often when we celebrate Dr. King, we do so by quoting his

speeches or sermons – and rightly so. He is eloquent and inspiration, but today I want to celebrate King for the spiritual care he took to nurture himself as a leader and pastor and person. I want to look at the practices that he cultivated behind the scenes...that helped keep him going. King suffered y'all.

Often, especially on this weekend, we make Dr. King into like a mythological superhero who can do no wrong – but he was human. He was a real flesh and blood person that suffered – greatly. Faith was not easy for him. He lived as a famished person in a famishing system. And yet he marched on.

Before he was assassinated his life was threatened many times. He suffered. He was stabbed by a disturbed individual while signing copies of his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, at Blumstein's Department Store in Harlem. But beyond individual insults and attacks, his phone lines were tapped by organized government agencies. His family was watched. His privacy invaded. He was arrested and imprisoned. He was accused of inciting violence – and had violence used against him and those marching with

him for civil rights – all the while he was protesting in non violent, peaceful ways.

King admitted many times that in public speeches that it felt like nothing would ever change. That the mountain was too high too climb. The cry for justice too hopeless a cause. King said as much at the end of his 1965 speech in Montgomery:

“And so as we go away this afternoon....I must admit to you that there are still some difficult days ahead. We are still in for a season of suffering...I must admit to you that there are still jail cells waiting for us, and dark and difficult moments....

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?"

Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign

supreme among the children of men?"

...Somebody's asking, "How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever."

How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."

...

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”¹

King admitted his struggles publicly – but he does so privately as well. And this is where we get a glimpse into what sustained him spiritually, what allowed him to be famished, yet faithful.

Perhaps you remember this scene from the film *Selma*,

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Our God is Marching On!” March 25, 1965, Montgomery Alabama. Accessed at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>.

when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. makes a late night phone call. There were many threats on his life and on his family. The undeniable weight of what lay ahead for King and the civil rights movement was heavy on his soul. In a moment of loneliness and fear and desperation, King calls and wakes up friend and gospel music legend, Mahalia Jackson. He calls and simply says, *“I need to hear the Lord’s voice.”*

And you know what Mahalia Jackson does? She just starts singing. In the middle of the night, at King’s darkest hour, she just starts singing:

*“Precious Lord, take my hand / Lead me on, let me stand / I am tired, I am weak, I am worn / Through the storm, through the night / Lead me on to the light / Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.”*²

As Steve Beard writes, “This iconic scene was indicative of King’s dependence upon spiritual strength, Jackson’s healing voice, and the Savior’s nail-scarred hands...*Precious Lord* was King’s supplication,

his way of reaching out for the hem of the garment of his Lord.”³

Think about this moment.

Not only did he know what spoke to his soul – gospel music, spirituals – but he had a friend who he could call in the middle of the night to sing to him. And he wasn’t too proud to say he needed that strength. What great humility and vulnerability – to call someone in the middle of the night – someone as famous and accomplished as Mahalia Jackson – to sing to him and remind him of God’s strength? Cultivating a friendship that’s strong enough you can call in the middle of the night? That is a spiritual practice. Knowing the music that heals your sin-sick, weigh downed soul? That is a spiritual practice. Having the humility to know when to reach out for help? That is a spiritual practice.

Even more, you can tell the depth of King’s friendship with Mahalia Jackson – because in a key moment in his career – when King was really faltering during his speech at the March

² Steve Beard, “Take My Hand: The Gospel And The Blues,” *Ministry Matters* (11 March 2015), accessed on January 15, 2023 at

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/worship/entry/5867/take-my-hand-the-gospel-and-the-blues>.

³ Beard, *ibid*.

on Washington – losing steam, losing impact with his audience – it was Jackson’s voice that cried out and said, “*Tell them about the dream Martin!*”⁴

And that’s all it took to snap King out of his script, and into his soul. It prompted King to begin speaking from his heart – giving us all the speech that we love and quote today. You have to know someone really well for them to be able to yell something like that to you on stage and for you to be able to be humble and open enough to hear it. That’s a good friend. A soul friend. A spirit friend. Those kind of friendships take cultivation.

Not only that – but this moment reveals something else. King had to have spent enough time dreaming about the dream, writing about the dream, talking about the dream with friends and family and in front of crowds and at churches, that when Mahalia Jackson said “tell them about the dream” – King didn’t miss a beat. This dream was within him, as close as his own breath, pulsing as his own heartbeat. This dream, of course, was rooted in scripture – in God’s beloved kin-dom.

Imagine the hours King must have spent in scripture, in study, in prayer, in creative spaces, in dreaming spaces – that inspite of all the oppression he was experiencing – he was able to sing forth about the dream as if he had worked on that speech for hours and days on end. It was in him. Within him. That is the fruit for spiritual practice, y’all.

Literally, King was famished and failing in that moment, yet he was faithful – so faithful that that speech inspired the world in a way that few others have. And King was able to be faithful in that moment not because of the faith he had in God (although that was important), but moreso I think, because he had been faithful to the spiritual practices of prayer, scripture reading, dreaming and co-creating with advocates and colleagues and congregations, and cultivating friendships. King had not let the suppression or oppression of his rights, keep him from cultivating a faith of promise and hope.

King also surrounded himself with a circle of leaders and people who could help him accomplish what he couldn’t on

⁴ Beard, *ibid.*

his own. Artists, intellectuals, actors, activists.

King was a leader who knew that he didn't know everything nor could he do everything – so he surrounded himself with other strong leaders, and a diverse group of voices and talents.

You know who was present at the March on Washington that day? Activists like the NAACP. Dancers Josephine Baker and Lena Horne. Singers Sammy Davis Jr. and Harry Belafonte. Athlete Jackie Robinson. Actors like Charlton Heston, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, and Sydney Poitier. Actress Ruby Dee. Writers/intellectuals like James Baldwin. Political leader John Lewis. Musicians and performers like Mahalia Jackson, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan.⁵

The massive effort in diversity of community and influence worked. It allowed the March on Washington to be seen clearly and fully as a day of peaceful protest, friendship, and equality for all.⁶

I emphasize this point to say that friendship and collaboration are spiritual practices too. We're not meant to do faith alone. If we are going to be faithful to the fullness of God's image – which will help us from being famished – we must lead and live with diverse voices around us.

In a recent interview by Maina Mwaura, Dr. King's daughter and director of the King Center in Atlanta, Bernice King said, *"Freedom is never really won. You earn it and win it in every generation...For authentic change regarding race to take place in our nation, it has to start with each of us looking within ourselves...The celebration around my father's life occurs at the beginning of the year, it affords you an opportunity to reflect back, and then to think more intensely about what it is that needs to be done and fine-tuned or that needs to be shifted or changed."*⁷

⁵ Olivia Hosken, "The Power of Celebrity at the 1963 March on Washington: The leaders of the civil rights movement were media savvy and expert political strategists," *Town and Country* (Aug. 28, 2020), accessed on January 15, 2023 at <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/tradition/g33657284/1963-march-on-washington-historic-photos/>.

⁶ Hosken, *ibid*.

⁷ Maina Mwaura, "Bernice King: We must win freedom in every generation," *Baptist News Global* (January 13, 2023), accessed on January 15, 2023 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/bernice-king-we-must-win-freedom-in-every-generation/>.

Indeed, reflection and critical inquiry of one's self is yet another spiritual practice that strengthens us for our journey.

Our faith never has promised us an easy road, it has promised us a worthwhile journey.

Beyond the stars of wonder and miraculous signs, one of the major revelations of Epiphany is that Jesus is more like us than we'd like to think. It's easier if he's radically 'other;' it lets us off the hook. But if Jesus is like us? Well, that might just mean that how he lives his life is how we are to live our lives.

From Isaiah to Jesus to Martin Luther King, Jr. – the prophets have always reminded us of this truth: Having Faith *in* Jesus is one thing. Being *Faithful* to his Way of Life is another.

Being famished, being tired, being beat down and washed up – finding ourselves in times in our life when we are suffering and sad and enraged and grieved – these are not the feelings that will find us faithless. No – it's when we do not practice the radical fullness of God's beloved kin-dom – and all that it requires of us – that we will be found faithless.

Just as the Israelites did not see the Promised Land, and just as Jesus did not see the kin-dom of God magically built in his day, and just as King did not live to see the fruits and after effects of much of his labor – that does not mean they were not faithful. And all of them. All of them – were famished y'all. Life was hard. They were famished, yet faithful.

The pace of life/faith will not change on this side of heaven. Life will be unpredictable – especially as we live as prophetic witness to the Gospel Good News. So, given that life will be unpredictable, the question is *what practices will sustain your faith?*

Even the smallest spiritual practice – is manna in the famine of wilderness. It doesn't take much. But find something. Something you can cultivate and practice – whether prayer or reading scripture or journaling or deepening friendships or practicing silence or walking in nature or reading theologians or singing psalms or listening to inspiring music or poetry or serving alongside others– find something that gives you strength and will help get you through. And lean into *that*. Pour time into *that*. Cultivate

that. And that spiritual practice will be enough to keep you faithful to God's presence and hopeful about God's promises.

We cannot wait for our appetites to be satiated with our final salvation before us, we must realize that we will be famished in this life more than we will be full.

But we can be famished, yet faithful. And in being faithful, we will see that our needs are provided for – and not just our needs – but the needs of all of God's beloved children.

Amen.