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Matthew 4:1-4

The Bridge

I'm walking along, pre-occupied with other things. The tasks of living. Going to school...finding a job, doing the job...finding a hobby, investing in the hobby...friends, relationships...I'm walking along, and I come to a hole in the earth. Unable to go any further, I stand, I stare...I tire, I sit. I look across the great chasm, and I see the other side. I see people living together, talking, enjoying each others' company...they're taking care of one another. When one is sick, they all rush to assist. When one dies, they all mourn and celebrate life together. They hold each other. They are grateful for what they have, they live in harmony with one another and with the earth. Each day they live for the joy of being together...each day they give of themselves for the sake of the others. There are still fusses and fights, but they are resolved with hugs, and laughter, and sometimes tears. There is no need to hoard or defend resources...there's more than enough for all, the God of all creation bestowing blessing after blessing, abundantly. There's music. There's singing. There's dancing and playing and restful nights and exhilarating days. Entire weeks go by without a disparaging word. There is nothing to be gained, save for the experience of living together for as long as possible...and as strangers wander into their camp, they invite them to do the same, modeling this life that is focused on a mutual celebration of life. Everyone is welcome...everyone is loved for who they are...God's Beloved. The young are treasured for their vision, their imagination, their energy...the old are cherished for their stories, their wisdom, their ability to reach out and care for their children, who in turn care for them. Their communal life paints a brilliant tapestry, and the brilliant sight of it pleases God. The thirsty are watered. The hungry are fed. The suffering are soothed with the balm of love and affection. It is not a small love that is boxed and caged and reserved for specific titles...it is a love that pours out and flows like water from a fall...its various forms of mutuality and reciprocity create a rainbow across the horizon. It is a community that lives FOR life, not AGAINST an enemy. I can see it. And I know I belong there. I want to go there. But how? How do I cross this chasm?

Ever see Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade? Indy came to this same spot. Behind him, lies his father, dying from a gunshot wound to the stomach, in front of him is what he believes to be the source of eternal life, the Holy Grail. But there's this chasm, this empty space between where he is and where he wants to go. He has his father's journal, clues and indications that give him hope that this is all real, that it's possible, but there's this giant hole through the world, how is he supposed to cross it? It says in the journal, "Take a leap of faith." And it's my favorite

shot in probably all of Harrison Ford's career, the look of fear and doubt on his face as he sticks out one foot, and falls forward into midair, and he's caught. There's this narrow bridge beneath him. He just couldn't see it before. It was hidden by an illusion.

Mysterious Reality: We don't understand the Jesus story, unless we take note of how it all started, how his public ministry began. He was drawn to John the Baptist, and baptized in the river, where he received information that would change his life, a dove, a brilliant light, and a voice, "You are my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." What happened here? Did anyone else see or hear what he did? Am I going crazy? Does everyone think the way I do? What does it mean to be "beloved" in a suffering world such as this...so broken, so unjust? Think about it—you live in a time and place in which the empire that rules your land uses your friends and family as playthings—taking money wherever they can get it, taking lives whenever they care to, completely indifferent to the suffering they are causing...How am I expected to believe that I am beloved? People die around me every day, and they die terrible, painful deaths. I'm not even free to comfort people with diseases, I was born a carpenter and I will die a carpenter, I am not treated as someone who is "beloved," but...I know what I heard. He sees the suffering world around him, but then he also has this other thought eating at the back of his mind...it is a mystery tucked within and behind reality as he knew it. I know what I saw. I would imagine that this messed Jesus up pretty good. So, feeling crazy, desperate, confused, Jesus doesn't just leave...he FLEES...into the desert, to get his mind strait.

When I had this same realization—when it dawned on me that I am God's beloved and I am trapped within a system that causes suffering, humiliation, and death for so many people I love and care for...and myself...how am I supposed to understand when God calls me "Beloved?" What good is it to be called beloved and have to watch people suffer and struggle every single day? How am I supposed to live with these two opposing forces tearing me apart from the inside? When I had my epiphany...I was already in the desert, so I had to seek my wilderness experience elsewhere, I needed to go get my head together somewhere else. So I felt drive by the spirit into seminary, and the other side of the country, and, ultimately, off the continent all together. And that's where I'm at today, stuck in front of this chasm that shoots through the entire world...looking for a way across to the promised land, a place where everyone lives as they truly are, God's Beloved.

Transformation Story: If we were to read the entire story of Jesus' trials in the desert, we would read the story of Jesus facing the devil in a series of 3 tests that are meant to defeat Jesus, to keep him from living out his calling as God's Beloved. We don't have time to wrestle with the entire story, so I want to keep the focus on this, first part. There have been many movies about the end of Jesus' ministry...but we don't often focus on the beginning. This is the origin story of Jesus. This is Jesus' Casino Royale. This movie would be called Jesus Begins, and it's the beginning of the Trials of Jesus Trilogy. And just like all the best trilogies, the 1st Installment is interesting for one reason: to see what obstacles our hero has to conquer in order to BECOME

our hero. Interestingly, there seems to be a consistent theme across the first part of a trilogy: he hero confronts The Tempter. The Tempter is a character—usually an authority figure of some sort—who tries to convince our hero they are confused, stupid, or simply inadequate for the task they have ahead of them. Agent Smith tells Neo that he’s fallen in with a bad crowd and as he has a mechanical bug forced into his neural, he’s told to go home, sleep, pretend like the last couple days didn’t happen. Batman’s teacher tells him he is too weak, his reluctance to murder his foes makes him an ineffective crusader for justice. Katniss Everdeen is told it’s “kill or be killed” in the Hunger Games. And in our scripture story, the devil is described as “The Tempter,” reminiscent of the snake in the Garden of Eden. This character’s strategy seems to be to insert notions about who God is, how God works, what God is thinking, in order to confuse and discourage his prey. The devil says, “OK, hotshot, you think you’re the beloved child of God? If you were really God’s child, you would have super powers. You’re really hungry, right? You’ve been out here a long time? Use your powers, turn those rocks into bread. If you’re really the son of God you could do it.” In every case, The Matrix, Batman, the Gospel, in each case the Tempter is offering a view of reality that is meant to defeat the hero before the battle even begins. The Tempter creates an illusion, hoping that the hero abandons their beliefs to fit in with this constructed reality. And you know what? It usually works.

This particular Gospel story seems to be acting as Indiana Jones’ diary, offering some clues about what someone will face if they go down this path that Jesus went down—the path that leads to God’s Beloved Community, in the face of a suffering and unjust world—and the warning is clear: There is a temptation to believe you don’t know what’s going on. There’s always an authority figure of some sort who can walk over and attempt to define reality for you, they create an illusion that is meant to calm you, to keep you from acting up, to get you to go home and leave well enough alone. The task, essentially, is nothing short of choosing your own reality. Do you accept the options handed to you by the world, or do you allow your faith to transform your vision of what is possible, what is real?

I believe there is a bridge, but I can’t see it.

Vocation: The Illusion that the Tempter offers carries with it certain assumptions: That as the Son of God, you should be able to have control over the physical universe; you should be able to cure anything that ails you (if you’re hungry, you should be able to create food); and if you’re unable to do this, then it must prove that you aren’t who you think you are. I’ve read countless commentaries on this scripture, and all of them seem to come down this way, “Obviously, Jesus *could* turn rocks into bread, but he fought the temptation to show off his abilities to impress the Prince of Darkness.” OK, that’s one way of looking at it. But I can’t help but think...isn’t that admission, acknowledging that Jesus *should* have access to unlimited supernatural powers...isn’t that taking the Devil’s word for it? I can’t help but feel that the real temptation here is...Jesus can let this guy call the shots. He could allow The Devil to spell out his job description for him, and then he could spend the rest of his life fulfilling that job

description...maybe he could turn rocks into bread, maybe he could control all kingdoms of the world, maybe he could jump off the highest temple and angels would catch him...maybe he would die trying. But Jesus is not interested in what the devil has to offer. His vocation seems to involve something more than simply feeding himself.

His opponent is trying to call the shots, trying to hand him the framework for how he should understand his identity, his role in the world, and he falls back to the only position he can trust, he falls back on tradition and scripture. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God." It's a passage from Deuteronomy, and Jesus uses words from this book. My hunger is deep, and bread alone will not sate it. God alone provides what I need to truly live. Jesus is not just rejecting the devil's terms, he is claiming for himself a reality that cuts through everything the world would tell him to value. Survival...not enough. Food...not enough. Power to accumulate goods for yourself...not enough. I am the blessed child of God, and this world wants to treat me like I'm not, so I REJECT this world, and I REJECT the idea that the greatest display of my God-given abilities is to serve myself. I would rather starve...I would rather SUFFER WITH THE WORLD.

As it turns out, Jesus was WAY ahead of the curve on this one. Here's the obligatory sermon reading recommendation: *The Spirit Level*, by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson. The full title is *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. They basically proved that the more a society is unequal, there are more hardships and disorders across the board. It's amazing actually, if you live in a society that has great inequality—economic, social, political, what have you—then the rich and the poor alike are negatively affected, more likely to experience death, disease and hardship. You can be the richest 1% of Americans, with more wealth than 80% of the country, and you actually have the same negative issues as the poorest citizen in Appalachia. It only took them 2010 years, but they have scientifically proven what a carpenter from Judea had a hunch about. That inequality among folks causes suffering equally among folks. The illusion offered by the devil in this story, is exactly the same lie that the powerful, rich elite in our world tell us: If you are worth anything, you can feed yourself. The strong survive and the deserving get rich. Let the suffering and poor and sick look out for themselves, let them prove they're worth something.

Folks, I am hungry. And I haven't been fed in a long time. There's enough delicious food in Germany to help me survive, even survive enjoyably. But I can't live within these systems that attempt to convince me I am somehow more blessed, more deserving than anyone else. I can't live as God's Beloved in that world because it's a world that tells me to accept the following things:

1% of Americans own 80% of American wealth. While state budgets go into deficits, schools and libraries are closing in our poorest neighborhoods, and social programs that would support the poorest among us are being rolled back...while multi-billion dollar corporations are paying no taxes at all. The war on drugs covers up the fact that America is the number one drug consumer in the world, and the prison industrial complex assures that colored men and women pay disproportionately for white crimes. Meanwhile our illegal guns and our lust for drugs is fueling a cartel war, turning Mexico into one of the

most deadly regions on the globe..and as poor, innocent people attempt to flee the violence and devastation, as they outrun drought and famine, American politicians use their presence to justify racist policy and hateful legislation...entire political careers based on fighting imaginary enemies instead of solving actual problems like environmental degradation and corporate thieves. We ask young people to fight our wars abroad, forcing them into situations and lifestyles that do such psychic and emotional damage to them that we have lost more soldiers to suicide than we've lost in our seven current military campaigns combined. We ask them to make the ultimate sacrifice for our country, but we do not provide them with the support and tools they need to re-enter society if they happen to survive! Our absurd gun laws flood the black market with illegal weapons so that anybody can get ahold of one and slaughter an elected official, a little girl, a school, a village...and this doesn't even begin to address a world that stands and watches as nuclear power potentially obliterates one of our most ancient and precious world cultures...or our lack of support, guidance and hope for young people of all colors who are looking at a bankrupt future with no safety net to support them.

Well, I've done that. I've lived in that world with no desire beyond feeding myself. And I got fat and I was never satisfied.

What we learn from the example set by Jesus is that life is about more than feeding yourself. The journey for those who would claim the identity of "God's Beloved" is one of denying the self, suffering with others, rather than participating with a world that uses and abuses God's Beloved. We go hungry in order to live. We reject what the world offers us to find something more...something better.

I still can't see this bridge, but like Dr. Cornel West always says, "Faith means stepping out on nothing and finding something."

Caring Community: Hope it would seem is a bridge that connects the place of suffering we currently occupy to a place of love and justice in the future somewhere. It is a bridge that can only be found by faith...because there are certainly no signs from our world that it exists at all.

Our ability to find that bridge depends entirely upon our ability to sustain one another on the journey. Not just in searching, but in walking. Because it's one thing to have this moment of transformation, a moment of clarity when we see the difference between the lies of the world and the truth of our faith. It's another thing entirely to live into the reality of faith. That cannot be done alone. In some ways, even Jesus' journey, which ended almost 2,000 years ago is only sustained by those of us who choose to walk that same journey. It's not just that Jesus died so that all of us could live, it's Jesus refused to comply with this world if it meant treating people as something less than what they are: A beloved child of God. He refused to merely survive at the expense of others...he chose True Life through following the word of God...and he chose to follow that word even unto death. That was his vocation, non-compliance with a world that grants success based on the oppression and suffering of others. His vocation was to choose a lifetime of loving and just walking even unto death.

What does that look like in our time and place? I have no idea. I know it doesn't exist yet. I know that as it stands now, we cannot help but be complicit in the suffering and oppression of others. Everything from driving a car, to buying milk, to watching TV involves playing into an elaborate economic system that is driven, primarily, by the suffering and oppression of others. To reject that world completely, to build a bridge of love and justice that runs counter to it, and to sustain that effort...we don't know what that looks like. But I'm not here to tell you how this ends. I'm here to tell you how it begins.

It begins with confronting the Illusions of our world and having the courage to reject them in favor of an imagined reality. It begins with us who can say, "all evidence to the contrary, I am God's Beloved, and I demand that everyone be cherished as God's beloved," and it begins with those of us who claim that reality as more real than the smoke and mirrors of our world that breed indifference and injustice. If those of us who live in this suffering world, those of us who are treated as if we are not worth anything, those of us who are used, abused, drained, put-upon, put down, cast out, diseased and voiceless...if we are blessed and beloved by the All Powerful Creator of All Things...then our only hope of sustaining our journey is to suffer together. To suffer with and for one another, to suffer with and for THE OTHER...if we see our vocation to be a community that is open and responsive to human suffering—key word RESPONSIVE, not apathetic to suffering, not silent to suffering, not accepting of suffering, but open AND RESPONSIVE to human suffering—then we sustain each other on the journey. We illuminate the hidden bridge, and we suffer for the privilege to carry one another across it.

Amen.