

“Come, Follow Me Home: Detours as Preparations”  
Matthew 4:1-11

Over the last few weeks our world has been reeling from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It was not something many of us expected to see in our current times when the international laws are so clear about such matters. We have also been through many wars like this, that we believed that people have learned the lessons of the past that war only brings suffering to all people on all sides. But somehow the lure of power and security has hooked the president of Russia into believing that this was a good idea. That is the problem with a lot of our bad choices. They often don’t seem bad when we make them. We have a justification for a compulsion that drive our actions. The pressures of the world about power, security, and esteem often make us suffer because we believe that these our only choices.

Another example of this comes from the movie, “Encanto” which is about a family that had to flee war and violence. They were protected by special magical powers that were given to them. Each member of the family had a special gift which was supposed to be used to help the community. Yet, because we as humans often miss the point, the gifts can become a burden when we are not grounded in love. When the fears and pressures of the world define us, we lose sight of our belovedness. This was the case with one of the characters in this movie, Luisa. She is supernaturally strong and can do so much and whenever she is asked for her help, she provides it. However, she feels the stress of having to be the strong one all the time. Here is her song in the movie, “Surface Pressure”: <https://youtu.be/tQwVKr8rCYw>. Here are the lyrics to the song:

I'm the strong one, I'm not nervous  
I'm as tough as the crust of the earth is  
I move mountains, I move churches  
And I glow 'cause I know what my worth is

I don't ask how hard the work is  
Got a rough indestructible surface  
Diamonds and platinum, I find 'em, I flatten 'em  
I take what I'm handed, I break what's demanding  
But

Under the surface  
I feel berserk as a tightrope walker in a three-ring circus  
Under the surface  
Was Hercules ever like "Yo, I don't wanna fight Cerberus"?  
Under the surface  
I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service

A flaw or a crack  
The straw in the stack  
That breaks the camel's back

What breaks the camel's back it's

Pressure like a drip, drip, drip that'll never stop, whoa  
Pressure that'll tip, tip, tip 'till you just go pop, whoa  
Give it to your sister, your sister's older  
Give her all the heavy things we can't shoulder  
Who am I if I can't run with the ball?  
If I fall to

Pressure like a grip, grip, grip and it won't let go, whoa  
Pressure like a tick, tick, tick 'til it's ready to blow, whoa  
Give it to your sister, your sister's stronger  
See if she can hang on a little longer  
Who am I if I can't carry it all?  
If I falter

Under the surface  
I hide my nerves, and it worsens, I worry something is gonna hurt us  
Under the surface  
The ship doesn't swerve as it heard how big the iceberg is  
Under the surface  
I think about my purpose, can I somehow preserve this?

Line up the dominoes  
A light wind blows  
You try to stop it tumbling

But on and on it goes

But wait  
If I could shake the crushing weight of expectations  
Would that free some room up for joy  
Or relaxation, or simple pleasure?  
Instead we measure this growing pressure  
Keeps growing, keep going  
'Cause all we know is

Pressure like a drip, drip, drip that'll never stop, whoa  
Pressure that'll tip, tip, tip 'til you just go pop, whoa-oh-oh  
Give it to your sister, it doesn't hurt  
And see if she can handle every family burden  
Watch as she buckles and bends but never breaks  
No mistakes just

Pressure like a grip, grip, grip and it won't let go, whoa  
Pressure like a tick, tick, tick 'til it's ready to blow, whoa

Give it to your sister and never wonder  
If the same pressure would've pulled you under  
Who am I if I don't have what it takes?  
No cracks, no breaks  
No mistakes, no pressure

We tend to do that to each other and to ourselves. So even when our motivations and actions are good, we can still miss the point of living life here on earth in light of eternity that we end up focusing so much on our own power and efficacy.

This week, we are invited to follow Jesus on the path of formation that helps us to not rely on our own ego power, but in the eternal love that sustains us each step of the way. After being baptized and claiming his identity as the beloved child of God, Jesus knew that he had to prepare himself for the path ahead. He knew that the temptations of the world would be so strong and so he needed a time of intentional formation. He went out into the wilderness fasting and praying so that the temptations of the world did not end up hindering God's mission through him.

After being hungry, tired, and alone for forty days, Jesus finally faced the temptations of the world. Part of his preparation for ministry was being aware of temptations that lure people into powers, security, and esteem. He could not do his ministry without knowing how to handle the challenges and pressures that would come his way. He left us a great example of how to deal with our own pressures. Instead of just running away from the temptations and pretending they did not exist, Jesus looked at them carefully. He listened and engaged the reasoning of the accuser or tempter. Then Jesus brought forth a divine piece into the temptation. He was so grounded in the scriptures of his people that he drew upon them in each of his responses. Jesus had stored up the words of faith in his heart and his mind, and when the temptation came his way, his response was already there for him. He did not have to come up with something new or on his own to figure out his way forward. Let's look at the three scriptures that he used to respond to the tempter:

1. **Hunger:** In response to this temptation, Jesus used some of the words of Deuteronomy 8:3, "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." This was a direct reference to the experience of the ancient Israelites in the wilderness when they were hungry and God provided them with manna.
2. **Safety:** When Jesus was tempted to seek safety, he responded with the words of Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." These words were spoken to the people of Israel at Meribah about the time they tested God. This was during their time in the wilderness and there was no water for them to drink.
3. **Worship/Esteem:** When Jesus was tempted to have control of the kingdoms of the world, he responded with the words from Deuteronomy 6:13, "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."

At every turn, Jesus was drawing on the spiritual lessons and wisdom of his people. He was deeply grounded in the stories and teachings of God's work among the Israelites and that gave him enough insight and power to engage the temptations through the Spirit of God.

We can try to not get into times of temptation. But it is not possible to do that all the time. Sooner or later, we are faced with a temptation to lean on our own power, to seek our security even if it is at the expense of others, and to have the esteem of others as our guide. Illness, broken relationships, wars, and unjust social systems are among the many things that tempt or pressure us. We can also blame our misdeeds or mistakes on others and thus projecting our problems and fears onto others. The invitation of this journey with Jesus into our eternal home is to be grounded daily in the stories and teachings of our faith.

Today, I will invite you to ponder what temptations you are facing right now, and scriptures might ground you in your identity as a child of God. With each temptation, the invitation is to memorize the scriptures which Jesus used to help him face his temptations and prepare for his public ministry.

1. Hunger representing the temptation of survival. Consider where in your life that you are tempted to let go of God's ways of love for the sake of survival. The scripture to remember whenever this comes up for you is: "Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met." Matthew 6:33
2. Safety: Consider how in your life you are tempted to focus on your own security and safety instead of trusting in God's care for you. "Don't panic. I'm with you. There's no need to fear for I'm your God. I'll give you strength. I'll help you. I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you." Isaiah 41:10
3. Esteem: Consider how in your life you are tempted to focus on esteem and social recognition because you have lost touch of your belovedness in God's heart. The scripture to remember when you are tempted this way is, "There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life --fear of death, fear of judgment-- is one not yet fully formed in love." 1 John 4:18

We will end with a Lectio Divina listening to all three verses and allowing God to speak to us through them. I will read the verses three times with some silence in between. The first time, I invite you listen for a word or a phrase that connects with you. The second time, the invitation is to pay attention to the feelings that arise around your word/phrase. The third time, pay attention to a message from God for you through these words:

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Prayer...Amen.