

Zion's UCC of Taborton

Third Sunday in Lent

March 4, 2018

Rev. Pat Raup

Temptations

Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 3: 15-21

Whenever Konrad and I find ourselves living in a new place, we make time to explore, to get out and about and find out just where we are on the face of the earth. When we were in a city, we would walk and walk and walk until we got familiar with the immediate neighborhood. When we were in the country we would both walk and drive. We are always fascinated by the places we end up. Being here at Zion's of Taborton is no different.

Friday afternoon, after the Ecumenical Lenten Worship and luncheon in Averill Park – which was both welcoming and delicious – we went home, picked up our dogs Buster and Daisy and a couple of maps and headed out. First we made a loop from the Taborton Road to Kipple Road to Bauer Road to Momrow Road and back. But Konrad wasn't through rambling so we headed out the Taborton Road again and using that old stand-by of turn right at this intersection and turn left at the next, we eventually found ourselves coming down a very steep hill into Berlin. By then we had a much better sense of what it means to be at the edge of the Rensselaer Plateau, the edge of the wilderness. Now, Konrad is never one to turn around and go back the same way he came, so we consulted the maps, headed down Route 22, turned right on CCC Dam Road, then onto Watson Road, and then onto Bly Hollow Road, which turned out to be the most adventurous part of the trip. Did you know that there is a Divine Brewing Company on that back road? Who would have guessed.... Anyway, we made it back to the parsonage safe and sound with a much better sense of where we had landed.

The last time we had tried to explore this area by car was 2 summers ago when we came up for the Summer Festival. As I mentioned before Konrad doesn't like going home the same way he came if he can avoid it. We didn't have a map, so off we went thinking how lost can we get? Well we didn't get completely lost but we did end up going round and round on a nest of roads [at least twice if my memory is correct] that all interconnected. By the time we worked our way out of that maze we were irritable and humbled. We had given in to the temptation to go off on our own, without a road map, thinking that we were smart enough to figure it all out on our own. We weren't. We learned our lesson. We will never go on a ramble in the wilderness without a map again.

Life can be like that. We think we know who we are. We think we know where we are going. We think we are smart enough to handle whatever comes up all by ourselves. And, then, OOPS, we succumb to some temptation or another and find ourselves lost, disoriented and in a great big mess.

That's what seems to have happened here at Taborton in the last year. As a community you succumbed to a variety of temptations, which added together resulted in an explosion almost big enough to destroy this community. I think you are still off-balance from all that took place.

Your task for Lent this year will be to look inside yourselves as individuals; to be as honest as you can possibly be with yourself; name the temptations you personally succumbed to, whatever they were; admit the pain and the sadness that flooded this community; and change what you need to change, so that this beloved community can heal and move forward. You have six weeks to do this. I think you can do this. I know that many of you have already started this inward spiritual journey of repentance because you have talked to us. Have courage, have hope and stay the course.

You will need a road map for this experience. As always it will be the example of Jesus. Today's Gospel only tells us that in the wilderness Jesus was tempted by Satan. We have to look to the other gospels to find out just what those temptations were. There were three temptations, specific to Jesus and his ministry.

In the first he was tempted to use his power to do supernatural things like turn stones into bread for people to eat. On the surface of things that sounds like a good idea, but Jesus saw beneath the surface and said: One does not live by bread alone. It is the Word of God that gives life. Temptation #2 was to throw himself off a high place and dare God to save him. Again, Jesus saw beneath the surface of the temptation and replied: I am not going to do that, which I understand to mean that it is wrong to tempt God, to assume that God will always rescue us without any effort on our part. The third temptation was for power, probably the most alluring of all. All Jesus had to do was bow down and worship Satan instead of God and then he would rule the world. Again, Jesus saw beneath the surface of the temptation and was steadfast in serving only God.

Jesus knew who he was. Jesus knew what he was capable of doing. Jesus knew who he served. Still, it appears there were some weak points, where temptation might have entered in. I can believe that Jesus was tempted to turn bread into stones, to feed the people he loved. He wouldn't want them to go hungry. I can believe that Jesus might have been tempted to depend too much on God's power and fail to develop his own power. I can believe that there were days when Jesus would have really, really wanted to become ruler of the world, to simply order people to live in peace and harmony and have them do that. But, he knew that people have to come to those choices by themselves if they are going to be genuine and lasting.

Jesus was grounded in his relationship with God and his familiarity with the Jewish scriptures, especially the psalms and the prophets. They were his road maps for surviving the wilderness. The psalms and the prophets are also road maps for us, but we have something more. We have the life of Jesus. We have his teachings. We have the example of his prayerful relationship with God. We have the Gospels. These are our road maps for navigating our lives, especially in the times when we mess up. For as we

heard from the prophet Joel on Ash Wednesday: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God relents from punishing.

So enter Lent bravely, trusting that God will be with you. Trust that you will not get lost in the maze of your own temptations. Trust that together we can put the events of the last year behind us in these next six weeks, so that we can rejoice in the new life God offers us every Easter.

Zion's UCC is being born again. It can rise up as a new creation, stronger and more loving than it had been. It can become a beacon on the mountaintop for living the Christian life in the 21st century.

In the weeks after Easter, Konrad and I will introduce you to other road maps – ones that can give us inspiration for being church in a new way.

So scrub away your temptations to make way for new ways of living. AMEN