

Runaway God—Matthew 4 1-11
(First Sunday in Lent—February 26, 2023)

Have you ever seen a runaway truck lane on a highway? I first encountered one on a trip out west, you see them on highways throughout the Rocky Mountains. I also encountered one when I moved to northern Ontario for my first ministry position, it's just outside of North Bay, southbound on Highway 11. These lanes are off to the side of the main lanes on a downhill section of road, but they're graded so that they climb upward. They're there if a truck should lose their brakes when going down a steep grade. The driver steers the vehicles into the lane which catches the truck with a series of dragnets to slow the runaway truck down safely.

Today's faith story from Matthew's Gospel acts in much the same way. In the first three chapters of Matthew's Gospel, God and Jesus are a runaway truck intervening directly and decisively in the world to set things right. We have angels appearing all over the place, a special star in the sky, complete strangers recognizing Jesus as someone special, and the heavens opening up to bless Jesus on his baptism. By the time we get to our story today the Messiah is a runaway truck ready to run over all opposition to usher in the kingdom of God. The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert slows this runaway truck right down. It causes us to pause and reflect on just what kind of Messiah this is.

It was also an important question for Matthew's community to ask. What kind of Messiah let's himself be killed like a common criminal? If chapters 1-3 go a long way to defining who Jesus is, then the beginning of chapter 4 goes along way to defining who he is not. Jesus is not a political power player or manipulator, and he is not a glory seeker. If Matthew's community was going to make sense of Jesus' life, they had to empty themselves of these earthly notions of power. If Jesus is to make sense to us as a church, we need to do the same.

Henri Nouwen, the late Roman Catholic theologian, academic and spiritual writer reflected on this very topic in his little book entitled, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. In it, he reflects on the temptations that Satan places before Jesus in the wilderness and draws parallels to Christian leadership; parallels that I believe can be made to Christian ministry in general. Nouwen concludes that Satan's three offers to Jesus are the temptations to be relevant, a problem-solving saviour (turn stones into bread), spectacular (throw himself from the top of the temple and let angels catch him) and powerful (to have control over the kingdoms of the world).

As I look at this, I see that what Nouwen lists as temptations are some of the most valued attributes in our society today. Nouwen says it's a trap. All the temptations were designed to separate Jesus from everyday people, to take him out of community and relationship with others. The call of God for Christian churches is to do as Jesus did and enter deeply into the reality of people's lives, enter into relationship and community and in so doing draw nearer to God. It's what refugee re-settlement is all about, it's what developing an anti-racism lens is all about, it's what visiting with the sick and dying is all about.

Our call is to provide an alternative to the despair and isolation of a success-oriented, ego driven world and proclaim the simple power of presence and accompaniment. Our call is to provide an alternative to individualism and proclaim community. Our call is to provide an alternative to manipulation and self-seeking and proclaim vulnerability and intimacy. Our call is to proclaim to those the world would label failures, and to those the world would label successes that there is a deeper truth that lies beyond those judgements, the truth of our unity, interconnectedness, and ultimate reliance on grace as the source of life.

In order to do this ministry, there is much of which we need to empty ourselves. The call of Lent as churches is to come face to face with the temptations that say we are here to build relevant, spectacular and powerful churches and empty ourselves of such notions. It reminds me of one of my favourite quotes about ministry from American writer and scholar Walter Wangerin Jr. "...I am convinced that we are not called upon to succeed at anything in this ministry. We are called upon to love. Which is to say, we are called upon to fail, both vigorously and joyfully."? Love is often quite messy looking. Love often does not look like success but looks like vulnerability, weakness and yes, even failure. We're here first and foremost to love, to embrace our vulnerability and the vulnerability of others as God's entry point into human life and leave the rest to God. That's faith in a nutshell. The love and presence of God is always there. The choice is ours; will we move away from it by falling for the temptations that build up our egos and separate us from one another or will we move toward intimacy with God by entering deeply into community with others? The paradox is that when we forsake success for community what flows forth is often deeply relevant, awe-inspiringly spectacular and profoundly powerful. It's the Spirit revealing the kingdom of God. May it be so, may the spirit not be slowed down, may it run away with our lives and our churches.

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