

Sermon on Luke 4:1-13
First Sunday in Lent, February 14, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Just over a month ago, on January 10, we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord. In the gospel reading from Luke, chapter 3, when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, the gospel says that the heavens opened up, “*and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*”

Today we return to the beginning of chapter 4 in Luke, where *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.* Most of us are familiar with this story, because it is told in three of the gospels (although they tell it differently). But what is key to understanding this story, especially in Matthew and Luke, is that the devil challenges and tries to *undermine* Jesus’ confidence in his relationship with God, as “God’s Beloved Son.” He tries to undermine it, make Jesus question it, and replace it with Jesus worshiping him, the Devil, instead of God the Father! What hubris, what *chutzpah!* But it’s nothing we haven’t seen in the Devil before, as in chapter 3 of Genesis, when the *serpent* asked the woman “*Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?*” The serpent questioned God’s warning, and said “*You shall not die...when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” So the woman and the man followed the serpent’s crafty ploy, ate, and discovered shame – not only that they were naked, but that they had questioned and disobeyed God, and broken their holy relationship by wanting to be like God.

So in Luke’s gospel, the devil tried to do the same with Jesus. Finding Jesus tired and hungry, after forty days of fasting in the wilderness, he *tempted* Jesus to use his power (*if you are the Son of God*) and turn this stone into bread. (Interestingly, the same temptation as that desired by the people in the synagogue of Nazareth – to see a miracle, if Jesus were the Messiah!) But Jesus, knowing his scripture, quoted Deuteronomy and replied, “*One does not live by bread alone.*”

So the devil upped the ante – taking Jesus up to see all the kingdoms of the world, and offered: “*I will give them to you in all their glory, if you will worship me.*” Again, Jesus answered from Deuteronomy, “*It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*”

But the devil doesn’t give up easily. He took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the Temple, and challenged him to jump, “if you are the Son of God.” Because if he was, God would command the angels to protect him – “*on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*”

A direct quote from Psalm 91, the same psalm we sang today in worship. So the devil knows scripture, too – he just twists it, and uses it towards different ends than Jesus! But Jesus knows his scripture better, and said, “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*” And so the devil left him, for a more opportune time. Jesus had passed the test, his identity, faith and relationship with God intact.

So what does the devil’s temptation and challenge of Jesus have to do with us? Because the gospels are not only the stories about Jesus – they are also about us, and the human condition – we are always invited to see ourselves in them! We see how much you and I are challenged (tempted, perhaps?) about our *own identity as children of God* from the day that we were born – and from the moment we were baptized. I think that this is our connection, even though we seldom make it. We think it is about how we can sometimes be hungry, and tempted to demand that God provide us with food, or whatever our bodies need – health, safety, whatever. We also think it’s about our own temptation to turn away from the Lord and worship other gods, or to take reckless risks in order to test God’s ability to rescue us. We have heard sermons that make these connections, or we may read this story and make it ourselves. It’s valid to do so, and we have done that before.

But what intrigues me today about this passage is how the devil challenged Jesus’ identity and sought to undermine Jesus’ relationship as the Son of God. Just like the devil – or society, or other people challenge the authority of God in this world, or challenge our own identity as God’s children, and undermine our relationship with God. Like Adam and Eve, we don’t do as well as Jesus did against such challenge.

When you and I were baptized, whether you were sprinkled, doused, or immersed in the water, you and I were *reborn* as children of God. As our baptismal rite says: “*In baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ. Living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.*” (ELW, p. 227)

But we know this is not a “happily ever after” story – neither for Jesus, nor for us. Despite the fact that he withstood the devil’s manipulations, Jesus faced a multitude of tests throughout his ministry. He was challenged by disciples who were slow to understand what he taught, and fought with one another over who was the greatest. He was opposed by religious authorities, scribes, Pharisees and high priests from the Temple, when he challenged them or pointed out their hypocrisy. In the end he was challenged by his arrest, trial, suffering and humiliating death on a cross – tempted at every turn to give up in frustration or fear – but through it all Jesus remained true to his identity as God’s Son, and faithful to

his relationship with God and his own followers. In his controversial, acclaimed book written in 1955, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis portrayed how Jesus overcome his temptation to run from the cross, and live out his days in peace, raise a family and live to an old age, to the devil's delight. But he awoke from this like from a dream, to embrace his suffering and the cross, and willingly lay down his life to redeem humankind. This book and the film based on it were highly controversial, for raising the honest question: what if Jesus was *really tempted to step away from the cross – would there ever be true salvation for humankind – and was it sacrilegious even to ask the question?*

I think it was a brilliant book, and the question is an honest one of faith. Because it takes the humanity of Jesus seriously, and demands that we see Jesus' real struggle over the death he faced if he remained faithful to his purpose as the Son sent by God to overcome death and so save the world. Jesus' divinity could not be fulfilled in the resurrection until he fully embraced his humanity, which included the challenges to his teachings and his faith, and the fear of suffering and death, which are faced by every human being. To skip over the trials and temptations of Jesus isn't honest, and makes a mockery of who Jesus is and what he did. To make it too easy means that you and I can't relate. Who wants to follow a person who doesn't have to show great integrity, courage and faith in order to accomplish something so great as victory over death, for the life and salvation of the whole world? Do you and I think it so easy for Jesus? It has to be at least as hard – or worse – than our own challenges, trials, and temptations that you and I face every day!

Which leads us to that word: *temptation*. Too often the world makes *temptation* into a comedy – making light of how we are tempted by food, chocolate, misbehavior or sex. (Like the comedian Flip Wilson used to say, “*The devil made me do it!*” The shallow version of temptation is to be tempted to do something you like, but shouldn't do (because somebody – your parents, the Bible, or God – told you not to). So Christians focus on cigarettes, gambling or sex, and miss the real picture. But more often we are tempted *away* from something, like a relationship that is good for us, like with our spouse, friends or family, or with God, away from our identity as a spouse, parent, friend or child of God. The devil tried it with Jesus, failed, but has much better luck with us! If not the devil, it's the media ads – which tell us how inadequate our life is without their product or their candidate! We fall for that all the time!

For *temptation* is not just about offering us the pleasure of bad things. To be truly tempting, it really needs to offer us something else that we consider just as good (in a different way), in order to let go of something or someone that we value already. It's a temptation when *the choice isn't clear between good and evil!* If the choice were clear, usually only fools or psychopaths would choose the evil!

Most good people of faith would likely choose the good – or have a good reason why not. A temptation is “successful” if the person tempted is able to rationalize and explain their behavior – for example, saying “my spouse doesn’t love me, so I’ll find love with someone else”. Or, “I’m not addicted – I’ll just have one.” Or “I can stop anytime, because I’m in control.” Then, *boom*. You fall. Perhaps the greatest temptation is for you and me to think that we can do this all ourselves, that we don’t need God – that faith in God is irrelevant to how we approach life.

That was Adam and Eve’s sin. And like Adam and Eve, we humans are not all that successful resisting temptation – we can hold out for awhile, but not forever. Isn’t that why New Year’s Resolutions (mostly about food or exercise) always fall flat about this time of year, in February? Like any honest addicted person knows, by ourselves *we are powerless against our addictions – we need a higher power!* Left to our own devices, we are destined to fail, because we are not Jesus. So we confess, “*We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against God in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone...So we ask God to forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in God’s will, and walk in God’s ways, to the glory of His name.*”

Unable to resist temptation or remain strong in our trials by ourselves, we must rely on the strength God gives us, through faith in Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans, “*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.*” (Rom 3:22-25)

So we are sent by God on this journey of life, with the gift of our identity as children of God – symbolized by our baptism into Christ, who goes before us to lead us. We are called to follow Jesus, his compassionate words and his acts of love throughout our lives as we love God and neighbor. So we have begun on this first Sunday in Lent empowered by our identity as baptized children of God – embarking into the wilderness of this world with all of its challenges and temptations. So here is the assignment I am giving you: first, to remember that you are a child of God. Please say the words: *I am a child of God*. Remember your baptism every day by making a sign of the cross on your forehead, with water. Between now and next Sunday, please write down your baptism date somewhere that you can see it daily – and either email to me the date, or write the date down on a sheet of paper by the baptismal font here at church. We want to have everyone’s baptismal date recorded before Easter! And on each Wednesday evening during Lent we will worship and reflect on what it means to affirm your baptism – beginning this week, when we pledge *To Live Among God’s Faithful People*. For this is how we are strengthened to withstand temptation and grow in faith, hope, and love – through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

