

Sermon on Luke 4:1-13
First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

I was tempted to begin this sermon with a lame “Ole and Lena” joke. But I resisted the temptation. Thank God for that! We hear the word *temptation* a lot as human beings. Advertisers use the word to sell us things, like asking if we are tempted by chocolate, sweet foods, fine tasting foods, pretty things, and if so, why not buy some? We find it very difficult to resist temptation ourselves. However, today it’s not about us! The story in Luke’s gospel today is about the Spirit leading Jesus out into the wilderness beyond the Jordan immediately after his baptism, where *he was tempted by the devil for forty days. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. He was vulnerable.*

Most of us are very familiar with this story, and the three temptations that the devil had for Jesus. The first one was for Jesus to satisfy his hunger by turning a stone into bread, “if you are the Son of God.” The devil also led him up a mountain to show him the kingdoms of the world in their glory, which he would give to Jesus if only he would worship him (instead of God). Finally, he took him up to the highest pinnacle of Jerusalem’s Temple and said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, so that God can send angels to bear you up.” To all of these temptations, Jesus said: *“One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”* Jesus held to his faith and his identity as the Son of God, over the devil’s false propositions. So the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time – which he would find during Holy Week. So stay tuned.

First of all, the temptation of Jesus by the devil was between him and Jesus. How the devil challenged Jesus’ identity as Son of God, and how Jesus remained strong and steadfast in who he was, in relation to God. It’s not about us, and our “temptations” today – so have no fear! We have enough challenges to worry about in life! Today we celebrate how Jesus was up to the task, and shows us how to hold onto our identity as “beloved children of God”, because that is who we are.

For we see that temptations are not really so much about us resisting all those things that we desire, which tempt us in our weakness, and lead us to sin. That would be too easy to preach (and impossible to resist). As we see in the scripture, what the devil is really doing is *questioning Jesus’ identity, challenging him about that which Jesus is most sure of: his faith, his certainty that satisfying hunger and your own physical needs are not the most essential matters in life, that there is only one God to be worshiped. It makes no sense at all to try to “test” God.*

So Jesus passed the temptation test easily, because he most certainly is the Son of God – “my Beloved, my Chosen – listen to him” – we heard the voice of God say at Jesus’ baptism and on the mountain of his transfiguration (in last Sunday’s gospel). The essential purpose to the passage today about Jesus in the wilderness is to solidify OUR faith in the identity of Jesus as God’s Son – which we profess in our creed, as our statement of faith. It is also for us to see how the devil works (the one who has also been called “the deceiver”) – by putting questions into our minds about what God is about, and who God has made you and me to be: *beloved children of God, all one, created good, male, female, and transgender, from all nations, including all human beings in one sacred family.*

So whether the “devil” is an actual individual being or not, or whether he/she is a personification of the doubt and evil thoughts that may be raised in our own minds, the point is that we all do have our doubts about our own identity as children of God, about our capabilities, lovability and self-worth. You and I doubt this all the time, from childhood to our final days. The questions may come from the devil, from others around us, from the twisted teachings of society about sex, gender, age, race and culture, or from deep inside us. It’s *“identity theft.”*

Here’s where this scripture passage speaks to us. Too often you and I hear the words *“you aren’t good enough”* or *“I’m not good enough”* – even when nobody says them out loud! We doubt ourselves, you may doubt that you are a child of God. You don’t see yourself like God sees you – as the child of God, holy and beloved, whom God has made! It’s sometimes as if the devil were to ask you, like Jesus was asked, *“If you REALLY ARE a child of God, you would have the strength to fast for these 40 days of Lent, or for even one day, Ash Wednesday!”* (False!) Fasting is only a spiritual practice, which some people find helpful, but it is by no means a “test” of faith. There is no commandment of God which says, *“Thou shalt not eat food (or meat) during Lent!”* It’s also as if you heard a voice saying, *“If you really are a child of God, a CHRISTIAN, you would never have any doubts about God, or about your faith in God, and you would believe and follow every teaching of the Church, every article of the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed, WITHOUT QUESTION.* (Wrong!) Every person of faith has doubts – in fact, the very DEFINITION OF FAITH is to have doubts and questions about God and the teachings of our churches and faith leaders. That is what faith is – if it were all a certainty, then it wouldn’t be faith! Because as scripture itself says (Paul, in Hebrews), *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1)* As Martin Luther himself had doubts about God’s forgiveness and mercy for him, a sinful creature, he wrote in the Small Catechism, *“because you and I cannot, by my own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel...and kept me in the true faith.”* Faith itself is a gift of God, through the Holy Spirit! (That’s

as Lutheran a concept as it gets!) Jesus himself had doubts about his call from God to accept the cross God gave him, so he prayed for hours in the Garden of Gethsemane for God to take this cross from him. But faith for Jesus was expressed in his words, *“Not MY will, but YOURS, my Father!”*

You might also be asked, *“if you really have faith, you could leap off this mountain without a parachute and survive, or you can be healed by prayer and faith alone, and forego vaccinations.* Once again, do not put faith in God to the test! Leaping into the air without a parachute, or not vaccinating children, is just plain foolish, and takes unnecessary risks for survival, and can harm others.

So, you see, our doubts about faith come from others and from within ourselves, in all kinds of ways, in all kinds of circumstances. But we see the promise of God given to you and me when God created us as beloved children. You and I are reminded of this promise when we are baptized, named God’s beloved children, and reminded of God’s gift of mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. Jesus came to prove God’s promise with his own blood, his suffering and death on a cross, which was the price he paid because of the doubts and challenge of human beings. He was willing to live out the “law of God’s love” to the death. And then, God’s power of love raised him from death to life on Easter. This promise comes to each one of us, you and me, a promise we are reminded of every Sunday!

This past Friday was International Women’s Day. I think most of you know this. It’s a day when the leadership, strength and achievements of women are raised up all around the world, because for far too long women’s voices, leadership and power have been doubted, diminished or silenced. I would like to quote two African American women, whom the Church commemorates every 10th of March, named **Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman**. Their “devils” were the monsters who enslaved or abused them, the system which made them slaves, and the white supremacy view of scripture that justified their enslavement. Those devils are very much alive in America today. But these two incredible women rose far above the limitations of their time – when they were told they were worthless because they were slaves, even “subhuman” – and became examples of courage, strength, and faith in God, women to be heard, admired, and honored by all of us. Sojourner Truth, was born a slave in New York, and freed when slavery was abolished there in 1827. She became a Christian and a preacher, and took the name Sojourner Truth. In 1851 she spoke at a Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio, a speech which became known as “Aren’t I a Woman?” *“I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?”* That same year she said, *“O friends, pity the poor slaveholder, in all his guilt and all his impenitence. God will take care of the poor trampled slave, but where will the*

slaveholder be when eternity begins?” And she knew herself as beloved by God, as a black woman, and said in 1863: “Children, who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black?...Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other?” In 1867 in New York she declared, “I will shake every place I go to.” And she did! Harriet Beecher Stowe told how she took her name: “My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wasn’t goin’ to keep nothin’ of Egypt on me, and so I went to the Lord and asked Him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up and down the land, showing the people their sins, and being a sign unto them. Afterwards, I told the Lord I wanted another name, ‘cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people.” She died in 1883.

Harriet Tubman was also born a slave, in Maryland, about 1822, and remained a slave until about age 30, when fearing she was about to be sold, escaped with the help of the Underground Railroad, in 1849. She helped about 100 others escape until slavery was abolished. She even helped John Brown in his failed 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry. She said after she became free: *“I looked at my hands, to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven!”* She said how she felt, like many an immigrant or refugee may say even today: *“I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks, and my brothers and sisters. But I was free, and they should be free also. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold damp ground; ‘Oh, dear Lord’, I said. I haven’t got no friend but you. Come to my help Lord, for I’m in trouble!”* During the war, she served as a Union spy behind Confederate lines. After the Civil War, she made her home in New York a center for women’s rights, and served the aged and the poor. She was often called the Moses of her people. When she looked back on her work leading slaves to freedom, she said, *“I freed thousands of slaves. I could have freed thousands more, if they had known they were slaves. I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say – I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.”* Harriet Tubman died on March 10, 1913 (two years after this church was built!). Never forget her witness.

So don’t believe the hype, or what others say about you.. Don’t believe the devil’s lies. You are a child of God, precious in God’s eyes. Jesus gave his life for you, and was raised to give you, and all God’s children, life forever.