

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2,9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Lent 1C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Fully Human

It's the first Sunday of Lent. And every year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear one of the stories of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. This year our story comes from Luke, and Luke tells the story differently from Matthew or Mark. The biggest difference happens at the beginning of each story. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. That sounds like the Holy Spirit led him there just so the devil could do his dirty work. In Mark's gospel the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. While Mark says the Spirit "drove" Jesus into the wilderness, he doesn't specifically say it was for the purpose of being tempted. He only says temptation happens.

In Luke's gospel, the one we hear today, 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. Again, Luke doesn't say Jesus was in the wilderness specifically to be tempted, just that that's what happened. Luke says the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness, as though there was always a choice about whether or not he would go. That seems important to me. The Spirit led him, and he willingly followed. He didn't necessarily choose to go into the wilderness, but the Spirit led, and he followed. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness...

That reference to the Jordan has to do with Jesus' baptism. We've skipped around a bit in Luke's gospel, but we're back in chapter 4, before Jesus' public life really began. If we go back to the beginning of Luke's gospel, we hear of Jesus' birth and the angel saying *'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'*¹ Then came the story of the 12-year-old Jesus who stayed behind when his family came to the temple to celebrate Passover, creating unspeakable chaos as his parents realized he hadn't come home with them. Jesus was perplexed by their concern, and could only ask *"Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"*² The next time we hear about Jesus he had been baptized in the river Jordan and *"the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"*³ Then immediately following God's pronouncement comes a recitation of Jesus'

¹ Luke 2:10-12

² Luke 2:49

³ Luke 3:21-22

genealogy, beginning Adam, the first son of God, and ending with Jesus, THE Son of God. Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, is led to the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights.

You might wonder why I thought I needed to tell you all of that. After all, this is the story of Jesus who, like all of us, was tempted, but unlike all of us, did not sin. This is the story of the forty days in the wilderness that mirror our forty days of Lenten wilderness. And while both of those are true, I think the things that lead up to Jesus in the wilderness facing all those temptations, are at least as important than the temptations themselves. I think they gave Jesus what he needed to face the temptations and to recognize what the devil is really trying to do.

At his birth, Jesus was proclaimed the Messiah, the Savior who was Christ the Lord. In the temple, twelve-year-old Jesus conversed with the rabbis and assumed his parents would have known he was in his Father's house. At his baptism in the Jordan, he heard the voice of God proclaiming him as God's own beloved son. And in his ancestry, he knew himself to have been descended from Adam, the very first son of God. Do you see? Jesus is completely grounded in his identity as God's beloved Son when he goes to do battle with the devil and that is critical to this story. On the surface, the temptations looked like bread and power and invincibility. But the real temptation, the one that would have lost him everything, was the temptation to deny his identity as God's beloved Son. It's true for us too.

It's not that the particulars of these temptations don't matter, they do. The first temptation goes straight to the gut. The devil says "You are starving. If you really are the Son of God, surely you can turn that stone into a loaf of bread." Well surely, he could. But he didn't, because turning that stone into a loaf of bread for his own personal satisfaction is not who or how Jesus is. People all over the world are starving and they can't turn stones into loaves of bread. Jesus loves, bonds and identifies with the poorest of the poor, the most outcast of all outcasts, the most oppressed of the oppressed. For Jesus to have turned that stone into bread would have denied everything about who he really was – God incarnate, fully human. Like those of us who give things up in Lent – chocolate, screentime, coffee – and do battle with our want for those things, Jesus sat with his hunger. Just as every precious, starving human on the planet must endure their hunger, Jesus endured his. God doesn't check out and do what only God can do. God, in the form of the fully human Jesus, made the only choice hungry people can make. He hungered. *"It is written,"* he said, *"One does not live by bread alone."*

Then the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offered them to him, along with all the power, prestige, security, and lordship, that went with them. Jesus could have it all, the devil said, all he needed to do was worship the devil. But it had all been given to him already, and Jesus knew that the sort of power the devil offered up, was no power at all. For Jesus, power resides in vulnerability, in being last rather than first, in surrendering oneself for the sake of love. God, in the form of the fully human Jesus, made the only choice any downtrodden or oppressed person can make. Rather than doing the power grab or offering his allegiance to the devil, Jesus told him God alone is to be worshipped and

served, not the other way round. God is not our servant. *"It is written,"* Jesus said, *"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*

And at the last, the devil does his worst. He goes for the jugular, the most vulnerable and tender place. In the first two temptations Jesus quotes scripture... he does that at this last temptation too, but this time, the devil quotes scripture to Jesus. It's important to remember that even the devil can quote scripture. Using God's promises against Jesus, the devil says... *"Jump off the pinnacle of the temple. [God] will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."*⁴ This is the worst of the worst and if we're paying attention, we can see that this is where evil, pure unadulterated evil, is so sneaky. Using God to turn one away from God is unconscionable. I know this. And the first time I experienced someone using God and quoting scripture to support a position so antithetical to anything Jesus ever would have upheld, it terrified me. And that's what the devil is doing in this third temptation – using God to dispel all that is Godly. Telling Jesus (and us) that if he is indeed loved by God, if God is indeed true to God's word, Jesus could jump off the temple and have nothing to worry about. That may have been true, but that's not the point. We mere mortals are vulnerable. We can't jump off the roof and expect to land unscathed. Our God doesn't promise to protect us against everything or even anything. Our God promises to stay with us, no matter what. So once again, Jesus lives into the fullness of the incarnation, his humanity, and refuses to do the things we mere mortals cannot do. What I see this first Sunday of Lent that I've never really seen before, is that amid all these temptations, Jesus never, ever, invokes any power a vulnerable person on earth couldn't invoke.

Whether we like it or not, whether we admit it or not, we are all profoundly vulnerable and we are all surely human. And one of the things that goes along with being human is temptation. We can talk about being tempted to eat too many cookies or not to tell the salesperson they've given us too much money back, or to invest in companies that make big money as they pollute the earth and hurry climate change along. Those things are important, without question. But they are all a part of the bigger temptation, the underlying temptation, the overarching temptation, the devil's favorite temptation... the temptation to forget who and whose we are. The temptation to forget our identity given in baptism and promised forever. The temptation to leave our relationship with God out of this or that part of our lives is the temptation we most need to guard against.

The bread, the power, the security and all the rest of the stuff the devil – or the world promises... they all fall away when we remember who and whose we are. Maybe that's our Lenten work. To recognize who and whose we are. To cultivate, nurture and nourish our identities as God's own beloveds, and to let that identity rule in our lives. Every one of us is a beloved child of God, and no matter how that identity is challenged – whether it be the crazy world we live in, the people around us criticizing or us criticizing ourselves, our identity in God gives us absolutely

⁴ Luke 4:9-11/Psalm 91:12

everything we need to make our way in the world. Will we be like Jesus without sin, withstanding every temptation with the perfect scriptural response? I doubt it, but that's not the point. We are God's own beloveds and grounded in our baptismal identity, we really can change and change the world. God's love is boundless, and God's mercy endures forever. Ours can too. Amen