

C Lent 1 3.10.19

Luke 4:1-13

Focus Statement: Jesus already won.

I have excellent self-discipline. I don't say that to brag, it's actually a confession. My self-discipline is so strong it tips past the point of helpful into a fault. Remember over the summer when I preached about seeing a physical therapist? I was seeing said therapist because I developed an overuse injury from running. An injury I made worse by running on for a week, to the point where I could barely walk, because I was so committed to following my training schedule. That was not the first, and sadly will probably not be the last, time my above-average self-discipline literally got me injured. Self-discipline, drive, and the ability to resist temptation, like just about everything else in life, is only good to a point. Too much of it can make us rigid and inflexible, unable to adapt to changes around us.

I open with this, because this is the first Sunday of Lent, and like every first Sunday of Lent the Gospel reading this morning is one of the accounts of the scene which is commonly known as "the temptation of Jesus." And because we read this story of Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil at the beginning of Lent, a forty day period often associated with giving up something, the message of this text sometimes becomes: Jesus was fully human and he went without eating for forty days, so you should at least be able to resist that cookie, or pop, or Facebook game. Or lose twenty pounds or save money or quit smoking or whatever vice you're trying to get over.

And let me be clear, fasting, the act of giving something up, is an excellent spiritual discipline. So if you've taken on some sort of fast for Lent, and that's a good and helpful spiritual practice for you, as your pastor let me say, by all means, that's fantastic. Let me know how I can support you, pray for you, encourage you in that practice. God wants for us to be the best versions of ourselves, and a great way to work toward that is the spiritual discipline of fasting, of an intentional break from something we're struggling with. But if we read this text as a shaming pep talk about how we need to "Be Like Jesus," we reduce Jesus to the role of motivational speaker or life coach. Which again, both are great, helpful things. But Jesus is more than that.

The good news about this text, about Lent, is it isn't about us. Whether you, like me, have such powerful self discipline that your doctor has a beach house, or you chase every whim like an excited puppy has absolutely no bearing on this text. This text, and the whole season of Lent, is about Jesus. About who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and how Jesus is and will live out his identity as the Son of God and savior of the world.

The text started out with "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, return[ing] from the Jordan and [being] led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." What you may not remember, because we read it back in January, but Jesus was returning from the Jordan where he had just been baptized. At which time "the Holy Spirit descended on 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.'" And after this morning's text, verse fourteen goes on, "Then Jesus filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee," where "he

began to teach in their synagogues” and proclaimed, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” I point this out to say, one of the key features of this story is that the Spirit is in charge of every move. The devil thinks he is, the devil thinks he’s caught Jesus in a moment of weakness, thinks he’s the one doing the testing, but this is, always has been, and always will be, the Spirit’s show to run. She’s hard to see, that Spirit. Rarely does she show herself in bodily form like a dove. Mostly she blows through, like fire, like wind, shaping and remaking us and we see only her effects, but make no mistake; she’s got this well in hand.

And under the Spirit’s guidance we’ve got this seeming test of wills between Jesus and the devil. One of the key things Luke shows us, by placing this story where he does, immediately after Jesus’ baptism and the revelation of his identity as the Son of God, and just prior to the start of his Galilean ministry, is that the nature of Jesus’ work as the Son of God is to oppose Satan and everything else that would seek to separate us from God. There is, throughout Luke’s Gospel, a battle going on between the Kingdom of God and those who would seek to separate others from that Kingdom, and this story is like a diorama of that overarching narrative. A battle which Jesus wins, enthroned in victory in the unlikely triumph of a cross, which we’ll read about just forty days from now. The devil’s failure here is both the opening salvos of that cosmic struggle, and a foreshadowing of its inevitable conclusion. The forces of evil never had a chance; the Holy Spirit was already holding all the cards.

But the devil doesn’t know that, cannot see that, and so the conflict unfolds. And ironically considering how this text is sometimes read, but the trap the devil falls into in this line of

questioning is the same one I talked about struggling with earlier, the rigidity of determinedly reading a situation only one way. Because everything the devil asked Jesus was scriptural, and every response Jesus gave also scriptural. But the difference was in the intent, and the effect of that intent on others. The first temptation, “Since you are the Son of God,”—and if I might interject a fun fact here, the NRSV translates it as “if”, as a conditional, taunting Jesus to prove his identity, but the syntax argues a better translation here is “since.” The devil knows, acknowledges even, what Jesus’ identity is, the challenge here is not to prove who he is, but to how Jesus will live out that identity, that Sonship—“Since you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” And of course we know Jesus is famished by this point, verse two told us that. But also, providing bread is a totally scripturally acceptable move. Moses called on God to provide manna in the wilderness, Jesus himself will feed five-thousand with five loaves and two fish, feeding people is certainly great. But it’s not enough. So Jesus replied with this line from Deuteronomy, “one does not live by bread alone.” The work of God is about meeting physical needs, absolutely, but its way more than that. The devil could only see one fixed, rigid path, Jesus cared about the wider story.

Then the second temptation: “If,”—and this time the “if” is conditional—“If you will worship me [all the kingdoms of the world] will be yours.” The challenge here is to Jesus’ authority, and the gain of power by compromise. The first, and obvious, problem is that the devil doesn’t have the power to give the kingdoms of the world or even the authority over them to begin with. Jesus as the Son of God will, and in fact already has that authority, a

power convened on him by the Father and a power which he, Jesus, will freely give to his disciples later on in Luke.

But let's say hypothetically, just for experiment's sake, that the devil did have the authority over the kingdoms and could give it to Jesus if he wanted to. The problem with this deal is that power gained through such back room dealings, if you do this, then I will do this, is not a free gift, there are always strings attached. The power the devil offers is a puppet power, a life limiting power. Not the free gift of grace Jesus will give his disciples, a gift that will transform not only their lives, but the lives of all those around them.

And last, and most importantly for this Lenten season, the third temptation. "Since you are the Son of God"—notice the "since" again—"Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" In case you zoned out earlier, the devil is quoting the Psalm we read earlier, Psalm ninety-one, a psalm about God's protection. The Psalm, plus the location on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, the very heart of religious and political power, makes the challenge clear. Put God's promise to the test. Cheat death, be saved by angels, right here in the heart of Jerusalem, in the core of the Roman outpost and the center of the Judean religious tradition, and show in an instant that you are the one to be followed. As Christian readers, and especially as Christian readers at the beginning of the season of Lent, we cannot miss the irony of the devil's challenge. Because we know where Jesus is eventually going. He's going to die. What's more, he's going to die in Jerusalem. But not, as the devil is

offering, in some glorious show of power on the pinnacle of social, political, and religious power. No, Jesus will die the death of a common political prisoner, on a cross on a hill called Golgotha, little more than a trash heap on the outskirts of the city. And in the glorious reversal that is the nature of God, it is in that action, of accepting death rather than avoiding it, that the true power of Jesus' authority is displayed and death itself is defeated.

Dear friends in Christ, the true message, the good news, of Lent that this story provides us just of snapshot of, is that the journey is hard and the way is long, but God already won. So let us walk with confidence into the wilderness of this season, knowing that we will be changed, remade, transformed by the journey, and that God has already triumphed. Amen.