

C Lent 1 3.6.22

Luke 4:1-13

Focus Statement: Since we are children of God, we are God's hands and feet in the world.

It's the First Sunday in Lent, time for the temptation of Jesus. Every year we start our forty-ish day journey through the season of Lent by hearing about Jesus' forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. And, true confession time, every year on the first Sunday in Lent I struggle with what to do with this text. And no year do I struggle more with it than the years we read Luke, with its very in-depth descriptions of each of the temptations. Three of them, appropriately enough, a Trinity of temptation, capturing the full range of human temptation.

I struggle with this text one because there are two fairly obvious ways to read ourselves in the story, and both of them leave something to be desired. The first read, and the one I use when not being asked to preach on this text, is us as deliberately distant observer.

Watching Jesus vanquish the foe of the tempter while recognizing Jesus' superiority over our ability to such a strong degree that Jesus' actions have no meaning or effect for us. We can Monday morning quarterback how amazing Jesus is at being Jesus, applauding his triumphs while comfortably remaining spectators. This is great in that it's easy, but it sort of lets us off the hook. Jesus goes from being tempted by the devil to gathering disciples, starting his ministry, and eventually heading to the cross. This text ends with the devil departing from Jesus "until an opportune time," so the specter of the devil's return hangs over the rest of the Gospel.

The second option is to cast ourselves in the role of Jesus. Jesus, after all, was in the wilderness forty days, we're about to be in the wilderness of Lent forty days, certainly Jesus' ability to withstand the temptations of food, power, and fame are a great parallel to me. Be like Jesus, withstand temptation, sermon potential number one shouts.

But there are two glaring problems with sermon potential number two. The first is, it was drilled into me in seminary, by no less than the bishop himself, that if you have put yourself in the role of Jesus in a story, you have misinterpreted the story. Jesus is Jesus, he is the Lord and Savior, the Prince of Peace, the Son of God, and we are not, thanks be to God. We are the ones Jesus came to save. It would be all fun and encouraging to stand up here and preach "be like Jesus, resist all the temptation," until literally anything happened and the fact that we are not Jesus was revealed in all its very mortal realness, and then what do we do with this story.

And here let me interject real quick here and confess the real reason this text is such a struggle for me. Because the second problem with the us as Jesus read of this story is: I could be Jesus in this story. The story of the temptation is Jesus is quite literally the only time in scripture where those words are true, but here they are. I could be Jesus because resisting temptation IS my vice, it is my temptation. Everybody's got their weakness, their addiction. Resisting things, controlling my wants, that's mine. Why do you think I stick to such a regimented running schedule? It's because I know myself too well to trust my body to tell my mind when it's done. My body will speak, my mind will one-hundred percent ignore it in its single-minded attempt to not be a quitter, to make just one more rep, go just

one step faster. And that, my friends, as you well know from watching me over the years, is how a distance runner gets hurt.

So I can't be Jesus, because one the bishop said no and two it feeds into my vice, but the lectionary gives us this text for a reason. We can't just let it stand at a distance while we raise our pompoms, Go, Fight, Win Jesus, vanquish the bad guys while we stand over here. What's a preacher to do? Luckily, there's a third way to read this text. And it comes right in the very first verse.

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. That's it, that's the verse, that's all we need. Well, that and a little bit of knowledge about the Greek logic structure at the start of each of the devil's questions. But let's start with the Spirit. Because remember the location of this story within the greater context of the Gospel. The temptation of Jesus happens immediately after the baptism of Jesus. At Jesus' baptism, he went under the waters of the Jordan, and afterwards, while he was praying, "the heaven was opened, 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.'" And it was after that encounter, when Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and named as God's Son, that that same Spirit led Jesus, named and claimed as God's own beloved Son, into the wilderness. Jesus didn't go into the wilderness alone, Jesus went filled with not the power of the Spirit, but full of the actual Holy Spirit as companion and guide.

And here's where we get to the fun part, Greek rhetorical logic structure. Fun fact, Gonzaga required a class on logic for all freshmen, I slept through my alarm, missed half the midterm, and still got one-hundred and five percent in the class. Logic is super my jam, but anyway. When the devil was tempting Jesus, it said, "If you are the Son of God..." do this. Turn stones in to bread, jump off this tower, whatever. If you are the Son of God. The Greek here is *hei*, and based on the other ways its generally used, there is an implied truth in this statement. We know just from context the devil wasn't really asking a question, but the Greek makes that statement even more clear. "If you are the Son of God—and of course we all know that you are, so of course you have to—turn this stone into bread." The devil wasn't tempting Jesus with a snack, he was taunting Jesus with the devil's understanding of how a God, or a Son of God, ought to act. Turn stones into bread, met your every want and desire. Have authority over everything and everyone. Cast yourself from the pinnacle of this tower, make people, even angels, immediately drop what they're doing and conform to your every will. What the devil was offering here wasn't the normal run of the mill temptations that we face, and when I say that, don't hear me diminishing the struggle of temptation, it's real, I'm just saying that's not what the devil was playing with. The devil was talking about power and control of a level well above what you or I could ever imagine.

Which means, dear people of God. The first way to read this text, the one where we Monday morning quarterback Jesus for how awesome Jesus is, ends up being the way to read this text. This text isn't about us. It is about the cosmic battle between Good and Evil, a battle which the opening blows are traded here. Then the devil retreats until the ultimate

showdown, on a cross on a hill on a dark Friday afternoon. Its full glory revealed in an empty tomb in the brilliant early light of a Sunday morning. This text isn't about us, dear people of God. It's about Jesus who always wins.

This text isn't about us, but also it is. Because here's the thing about the Spirit that filled Jesus, that Spirit fills us too. We're, what, a little more than forty days out from Easter now. Fifty days after that, we'll gather here again to hear about how the disciples were all together in one place, when a mighty wind blew over them, tongues of fire rested on each of them, and they began to speak as the Spirit gave them ability. The Spirit that came to Jesus on his baptism, that named him as God's beloved Son, that same Spirit came to you at your baptism. Filled you with promise, called you God's child, promised to never leave you. The good news for us in this text isn't go be Jesus. Because, let's be real, we're going to fail at that, that's not good news. The good news for us in this text is that we do not go through these struggles, any struggles, alone. We go with the Spirit.

We are entering into the wilderness, dear people of God. The wilderness of Lent, but also the wilderness of the world. A world that will throw all sorts of struggles, trials, and temptations at us. Some of them we'll resist, some we won't. And that's ok. Because the promises made to us in the waters of baptism, around the food of this table, is that the Spirit goes with us, Jesus goes with us. We try and fail and try again. Confident in our ultimate victory, for it has already been won. Thanks be to God. Amen.