

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
February 26, 2023
Matthew 4:1–11

Let us pray for inspiration from and an awareness of God’s Spirit.

Holy God, reveal your presence to us this day as we journey this path with Jesus. Through all of life’s trials and tribulations your Word sustains us for the journey ahead. Send your Spirit upon us that we might listen, discern, and take heart. Be near us this day and may your Word with us stay and dwell with us forevermore. Amen.

The reading for the day, this first Sunday of Lent, is one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. All three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, contain the story of Jesus’ temptation. Even the book of Hebrews makes mention of it. For many of us, it may be a familiar story. Because the story is the various Gospels, we hear about the temptation of Jesus each year on this Sunday. It is a foundational story. Maybe even part of Jesus’ origin story, the story that forms, shapes, and frames all that comes after it.

Listen now for a word from God.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Beginnings are important. They set the stage. Beginnings can be difficult. One of the most difficult tasks any writer, storyteller, or preacher, for that matter, has is to make a good beginning. Almost each week as I sit in front of my computer, I write a prayer, I copy the scripture down on the page, and then I stare at a blank page wondering how to start. Many times, as I prepare to write a sermon, I start not at the beginning, but rather somewhere in the middle, and then at some point, once I have an idea of where the spirit is leading me, I go back and write the beginning.

The beginning of the Gospel of Matthew starts with a genealogy, which leads to the birth of Jesus, visits from the Magi, and then the holy family fleeing for their lives to escape the murderous fear of King Herod. It’s difficult. Fraught with danger and uncertainty. From there we jump forward in time and hear of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist and hear the voice of God declaring, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I

am well pleased.” And then we go directly from there to the story of the temptation. Still more of the story fraught with danger.

Jesus, after 40 days of fasting, is met in the wilderness, alone, and tempted by the devil. Three times Jesus is tested or tempted in different ways, and each time Jesus faces the temptation and turns the devil away. At each turn, with each temptation, Jesus defies expectations, and our own experience, of being self-serving, of concerning himself with his own needs, exercising his own power, of listening to the powerful and seductive voice to turn from God. Jesus doesn't succumb, he passes the test. Directly after this, Jesus then calls his disciples and begins his public ministry.

What a beginning. What a preamble and prologue for what is to come. Because this story is always set at the beginning of Lent, with its temptations and tests, and because one primary practice for Lent is for us to give things up, sometimes I wonder if we miss the fullness of this story. I sometimes look at this story and I think, “well, Jesus was able to resist turning that stone into bread when he was really hungry, so I should be like Jesus. I promised this Lent not to eat chocolate, so I better not eat chocolate.” It just doesn't quite have the gravitas of what is going on here. I'm not so sure this story is about temptation or testing, as much as it is about an understanding of Jesus' own identity and his relationship to God and what that means, particularly when things are difficult. That maybe this time in the wilderness, directly after his baptism and hearing the declaration that he is beloved, is a time when Jesus can truly comprehend and fully live into his being and identity as a child of God.

One writer suggests that the devil is not so much a deceiver, as he is someone who sows the seeds of distrust.¹ Listen to the temptations that the devil puts before Jesus and hear the seed of doubt behind each one.

Turn this stone into bread, you may go hungry. Throw yourself down to see if God's angels will catch you, how do you know God is trustworthy? Have all the kingdoms in the world, you may not have enough.

“While the “content” of the devil's temptations includes the capacity to turn stones to bread, call upon angels for safety, and the promise of power and dominion, each again is primarily about identity. Notice that the devil begins by trying to undermine the identity Jesus had just been given at his baptism in the previous scene. “*If you are the son of God,*” that is, functions to call that identity into question.”

Every reply that Jesus makes shows his reliance and trust in God for his identity. And maybe that is the thing that we need to pay attention to most. Maybe that's what we need to hold onto, our identity in God. While we might be inclined, tempted even, to think of the interactions between Jesus and the devil in terms of status or power, they actually have a lot to do with identity. The words that Jesus and we hear directly before the temptation in the wilderness are “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It's about identity. “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Identity. As one writer says, “Identity. It's always God's first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God's own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong.”ⁱⁱ

“Each day we are besieged by countless advertisements that seek to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy, undermining our God-given gift of identity with the promise that if we buy this car or use that deodorant or make our teeth brighter, we will be acceptable. The message of the consumer-consumption culture is simple: *you are not enough*. Not skinny enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong

enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love, and acceptance. And here's the thing: it's a lie, a demonic attempt at a kind of identity theft far worse than the one we've been told to fear. And Jesus offers us a way out, a way to safeguard our identity by lodging it in God's good gift and promise."ⁱⁱⁱ

We have all these things telling us that we are not enough, or even worse trying to tell us to be something we are not, trying to define our identity, but only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.

Maybe the devil approaches Jesus in the wilderness and starts by saying, "if you are the Son of God..." because it is not in our search for power and status where we are vulnerable, but rather it is because there is temptation about being insecure in our identity as God's beloved children, and not trusting our relationship with God.

"If God's first move is to give us our identity, then the forces against God (in whatever way you want to name that), maybe is to call that identity into question. To whisper in our ear that we are not enough. Surely God doesn't call us beloved." Maybe we are tempted, as preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber has written, "to doubt our innate value precisely to the degree that we are insecure about our identity from, and our relationship to, God."^{iv}

The "if" of doubt, the "if" of not enough, the "if" of all the trials, temptations, and troubles that come at us can be overwhelming. Maybe the primary lesson to take from Jesus' own time of trial and temptation is to lean into our identity as God's beloved children just as Jesus does. Jesus' beginning, even with all the uncertainty and trouble, is ultimately solidified in his understanding of who he is. What his relationship to God is. Maybe, for some of us, this Lent isn't so much about giving something up as much as it may be about leaning into our identity as beloved children of God.

Perhaps the most famous poem by Rudyard Kipling is entitled, “If.” It is a poem written by a father to a son, and I think, expresses the father’s hope for his son as he matures and grows into his own. It also is about identity, but I believe, uses the question of “if” in a different light. The poem “If” by Rudyard Kipling.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

What is definitive for us, and therefore more important than all the good or bad things we carry with us, or what we give up, “is that God has called us God’s own children, individuals who hold infinite worth in God’s eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God’s beloved world.”^v

Jesus starts his public ministry only after the declaration of his beloved-ness at the river, and after he spends his own time deeply understanding his own identity. Not until he is secure in himself is he then able to pour himself out to others. And I think it is important to mention that after this time of testing, temptation, and trouble, there is also a time where Jesus is served by God’s own angels. And then after that, Jesus’ first act is to call together other people to do ministry with him. His identity in God is not ultimately a solo act, but also includes a community around him.

As you enter Lent this year, as we begin again, I invite you to consider ways that you can lean into your beloved-ness, into your identity as a child of God. For some, it may be a more traditional Lent, where giving something up allows you to fill that space with being more focused on the ways of Christ, to becoming more Christ-like. For others, maybe it is about finding perspective or a practice this season that allows us to

deepen our identity as beloved children of God; to remember the goodness and mercy of God and to center our being there.

I invite you to think about the essence of what will orient your days to come. What claims about God do you make, and given those claims, what does it say about your own identity? Out of those claims, how can you serve others? I can almost guarantee that life will not go as you plan, that we will all hit trials and temptations. When they occur, I invite you to think about our beginning, as being those that bear the image of God. How then, might you nurture your identity as a child of God? What are your main commitments, what is your foundation, so that when things don't go as planned or hoped for, you have something that helps ground you and provides meaning for your life? In the days ahead, when you hear the word "if" whispered in your ear, may that "if" be grounded in trust in God and the community that surrounds you so that it is less temptation and more promise and possibility. Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=668

ⁱⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber *Pastrix* page 138-139

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3088>

^{iv} Bolz-Weber, 139.

^v David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2980>