

"Tested in the Wilderness" – Luke 4:1-13 – March 10, 2019

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On this first Sunday in the season of Lent, we come to another familiar story in Luke's gospel. In the context of the gospel, this story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness comes immediately following his baptism. If you recall, when he was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him and a voice from above proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." As Jesus is preparing to embark on his ministry, he is identified and claimed by God. He is called Son of God, he is loved by God, and he has found favor with God. The Spirit of God then leads Jesus into the desert for a time of preparation. In this time of solitude, meditation, and prayer, Jesus will solidify the basis upon which his ministry will take shape. What happens there will inform his work and ministry.

This past Wednesday, many of us gathered at the Methodist Church to officially begin our Lenten journey, receiving the sign of ashes. Lent is a time of preparation. It mirrors Jesus' 40 days in the desert. And like that, it is a time of self-examination, and a time in the church year when we are invited to join with Jesus on this path of introspection. It is a time when we too can live into our identity as God's beloved children and deepen our faith as we yearn to grow closer to God.

In this story we are told that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. 40 days without food, without loved ones, without the comforts of home. He was exhausted, famished, alone – his physical body was weak and his mental defenses were at their lowest. While in this weakened state, the devil approaches Jesus and strikes up a conversation, offering Jesus three temptations.

The first temptation is a simple one. It focuses on his hunger, a basic human need. The devil begins, "If you are the Son of God, why not make yourself some bread to eat?" The devil is not questioning the identity of Jesus. He knows exactly who Jesus is. But he goads him to use his power to feed himself. "See these stones here? It would be nothing for you to change them into bread."

What the devil was really saying, by implication, is, if Jesus can turn the stones to bread, imagine how easy it would be for him to solve the problem of hunger. Just turn all the stones to bread. Yet Jesus responds with Scripture, "One does not live by bread alone." Those words had been spoken by Moses as Israel stood on the border of the Promised Land, and it refers to the belief that God will provide for all our needs. While the Israelites had wandered in the desert for 40 years after their Exodus from Egypt, they griped about the food they had to eat.

They weren't satisfied with the manna God have given to them. They questioned God's ability to provide for them.

In the next temptation, the devil offers to Jesus all the power and the wealth of the world. All Jesus has to do is worship the devil, and it will all be his. This is a seductive thought. Imagine if Jesus were in control of all the worlds' nations. There would be peace, justice, mercy and love. If Jesus were the political ruler of the world, imagine how life would be different. "Put me first in your life," says the devil, "and all this can be yours!" But Jesus responds, again with Scripture, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

The lure here is for worldly power. Even if it is used for good, it comes at too high a cost – worshipping something other than God. Jesus, as the Son of God, already has all power and authority given to him by God. Jesus is already a King, but it is in God's Kingdom. His path is not one of political power and domination. His is the way of humbleness and submission. The devil offers an invitation for Jesus to compromise his faithfulness to God in order to gain worldly success.

In the final temptation, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the top of the Temple. The devil dares him to prove that he is the Son of God. "Why not start your ministry with an awesome deed of power? Who could deny your identity if they witnessed this incredible miracle? People need tangible and visible evidence to believe things. Here's your opportunity to really grab their attention." The devil believes that Jesus would be protected if he put himself in danger, and he even uses Scripture to back up his point.

Jesus responds again with Scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." God already has a plan for Jesus' life. It is ironic that Jesus will actually save the world through the giving of his own life. He will face this temptation once again in the Garden of Gethsemane. And in that instance, like here, he chooses to follow God's will instead of following his own.

These three temptations were all possible for Jesus to accomplish and, indeed, could have had great benefit for the world around him. People would flock to him willingly and he could assert his power to make people follow his rule. He could succeed in helping people by bringing about justice and peace, but at the cost of giving up his identity as God's beloved son and severing his allegiance to God. They would fundamentally change who he was and interfere with his true mission and his trust in God.

Through his time in the desert, Jesus gained a better understanding of who he was and what his role should be. In his time of fasting and prayer, he came up against some very real

temptations – temptations that would benefit the people but in a way that would compromise his true identity and pull him away from God.

The season of Lent offers us a time for our own introspection. Many followers of Christ specifically use this period of time leading up to Holy Week and Easter to intentionally grow in their faith through the practice of spiritual disciplines. You've probably heard of people giving up things for Lent or incorporating a regular spiritual practice. But people who give up chocolate or caffeine just for the sake of giving up those things are missing the point. The point of the self-denial or the intentional practice is specifically to focus on God and draw closer to God. It is for the purpose of looking within ourselves and discovering a new or different aspect of our identity as one who is not only created by God, but beloved by God. It is a time for us to examine our true nature and perhaps put aside one of the distractions that draw us away from God.

Achieving this comes through an intent of the will, to choose to follow God, to choose to understand God's ways, and to live our lives accordingly. This isn't easy, and we will face temptations or distractions that try to lure us away. It can be a scary undertaking. Sometimes we will be awakened to something in our lives or in our thoughts or in our beliefs or in our actions that is contrary to us being our true selves.

Sometimes I refer to the season of lent as a time of spiritual spring cleaning. A time to take a hard and objective look at our acts and attitudes. There are probably one or two or more things that we need to let go of. Maybe we're holding on to grudges or stereotypes, perhaps we uncover self-criticism or self-harm, maybe we self-medicate or put up walls to mask our vulnerabilities. Maybe we doubt or disbelieve. Maybe it's time for us to discard those things that keep us from knowing our true worth in God's eyes. We are beloved children, all of us. Whether we like it or not, we are joined with one another in the human community. This Lenten season, may you learn something new and good about your identity as one who has been created in the image of God.