

March 10, 2019 • First Sunday in Lent

“The Art of the Possible Sermon Series: Define or Be Defined”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 4:1-13

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. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If 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.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Each year, the temptation of Jesus launches us into the season of Lent. This 40-day season of spiritual preparation designed to just maybe make it possible for the earth-shattering, world-transforming, life-giving truth of the Resurrection to make everything new, for each of us, for the church itself, and for this world.

It starts here. In the wilderness. Jesus and the Devil are the main characters, but the Spirit is always there too, maybe just off screen, and the angels are waiting in the wings.

Many things have already happened in Jesus’ life to lead up to this day. Jesus has been baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. And what follows from there will change the world. This newly-anointed Messiah declared his message about the Kingdom of God for which he has been sent: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus has come with a message about the Kingdom of God. He is clearly a man on a mission. And today we see just how easy, how tempting, it might be for him—and for us—to lose track of what that mission, God’s mission, is really all about, especially given the anticipated cost.

We have heard him begin to teach about how this Kingdom would be characterized by a love so broad and all-encompassing that the home-town crowd would be enraged by its radical scope. In God’s Kingdom, as he said, all the outcasts and foreigners would be loved just as much as they themselves and they were so angry that they nearly hurled him off a cliff. Today we hear how the very same Holy Spirit that filled and sanctified and anointed him in his baptism, now leads him into the wilderness, through 40 days and 40 nights of fasting, and right into a really scary exchange with the Devil himself.

Maybe the church should issue a warning about what just might come along with a dose of baptism by water and the Spirit: public ostracism, private doubt, hunger pangs, hallucinations, hearing voices, temptation to think too much of yourself, temptation to think to little of yourself, encounters with the Devil...

What happens out there in the wilderness? What are we to make of all this drama? What is our biggest risk of temptation?

A seminary professor tells a precious story about her little almost-four-year-old son and his interpretation of this story. He’d been to Sunday School and apparently his teacher had done a really good job of bringing this story to life for the children of the congregation. That afternoon, he brought it up. “Hey, mom,” he asked, “what do you know about the Devil?” Quickly scanning a number of possible responses, she wisely turned the question back on him. “What do you know about the devil?”

“Well,” he said, “the Devil talked to Jesus.” (Good—he was paying attention, thinks his mom.) “And the Devil was mean.” And then, leaning in closer towards her and dropping his voice, he said, conspiratorially: “If we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and...there was candy...the Devil would talk to me and say: you should take some!”

She said: “Honey, if we were in the store, and Dad and I were in one aisle and you were in another, and the Devil said you should take some candy, what would you say back?”

A genuinely sweet grin lit up his entire face and without hesitation he replied: “Oh! I would say thank you!”

Instead of candy, the Devil talks to Jesus and offers Jesus the power to make stones into bread and be the one who can feed all the hungry people of the world. The Devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, their glory and authority.

That's pretty tempting, but not the end of it. With one more trick up his sleeve, the Devil challenges Jesus to test God's Word, risking his life in the bargain, implying that God really doesn't have the power to come through on the things God has said.

That's really where the Devil is trying to trip Jesus up. The Devil knows some things already about this Kingdom of God and that's his hook. OK, Jesus, Mr. Messiah. You want to feed hungry people? Stick with me—you got it! Stones to bread. I'll give you the economic power the new messiah must surely seek.

Hey, Jesus, you want to overthrow these horrible Roman oppressors and set your people free? Done. I'll give you the glory and authority of all the kingdoms of the earth. Stick with me. I'll give you in an instant all the political power this new Messiah must surely need.

Don't want that either? OK, Jesus. You think your God is so great? Let's see if you don't have doubts. I bet you won't jump off the pinnacle of the Temple 'cuz you're not really sure that God's angels will be there to rescue you. See, I've just wormed my way into your soul and put fear in your heart. I'm more powerful than your God, Jesus. Join my team, and I'll give you all the spiritual power you can handle.

Jesus' temptation was not so much to do things that were desirable but not good for him, like stealing candy in the grocery store, or even eating too much of the candy we have paid for fair and square. Jesus' temptation was to sell-out, to let the Kingdom of God slip away for something more popular, more immediately gratifying, something that didn't come with such a high price-tag. The point of Luke's story is about the things that tempt and distract and about Jesus' choice—and ours—to be obedient to God and to keep our focus on God's kingdom.

Oh, that little boy was right about many things. The Devil is mean. And clever. And knows us very well. And talks to us. The Devil knows how easy it is for us to be seduced by the promises of this world, by the temptations of self-reliance, by the compromising of God's agenda for something easier, more palatable, more popular. The Devil works to divert us from God's kingdom goals. It's going to take every ounce of strength and conviction the recently-baptized Jesus can muster to stay focused on the mission God has sent him to accomplish.

The cost is high, but the rewards are great. For though Jesus does not turn stones into bread, he does feed the hungry. Though he does not give in to political expediency, he does usher in God's reign of righteousness and peace. And though he does not test God by throwing himself from the cliff, he goes instead to the cross, trusting that God will redeem his suffering and bring life out of death.

Jesus resists the easy way out. "Define or be defined," it is said. In this story we see Jesus' conscious choice to define himself and the Kingdom values God has sent him to teach and embody. He will not let the Devil define him or his purposes, however tempting and attractive that might be.

Politics has been described as "the art of the possible." Cynically, that means settling for the least of what you can get, because at least it's something. Jesus refuses to take that route. After fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, his heart and mind know that something much more is possible. He retains the option of clinging to faith in God and not surrendering to the devious ploys the Devil. Jesus already knows, quite clearly, that with God, nothing is impossible! So, he is able to re-imagine what is possible. To let God's love open a whole new window of possibilities and stick to what is right, what is worthy, what is holy.

May we keep a Holy Lent, setting aside some moments of quiet reflection and prayer in which we might sort out the competing voices in our heads. May we strive to get clear. Who do we choose to be? Who will we define ourselves to be? Whom do we choose to follow? The mean, cunning Devil, or the God of grace and glory? What are the values that become the marks of our personhood and discipleship?

This Lenten spiritual work is important for our own lives. It's important for the church as well, especially now for The United Methodist Church in this kairos moment, this propitious Holy Spirit-filled moment for decision and action. If the Devil led us into the wilderness of St. Louis and the General Conference session, the Holy Spirit and all God's angels are hovering over now to empower us to re-imagine a new future for a loving, grace-filled church.

It's time, it's time for all of us, it's time—even as Lent is just beginning—it's time, as the poet Wendell Berry puts it, it's time to "practice resurrection."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Notes:

I am indebted to Lori Brandt Hale and Sharon Ringe in *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 2, Lent Through Eastertide*. Louisville: WJK, 2009.

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