

Sermon

I recognize the irony of your coming here this morning, the snow and potential ice on the same Sunday we hear the words of Jesus instructing us not to put the Lord our God to the test.

Those of you listening live from the safety of your home, good on you. If you'll excuse the rest of us heathens, we've got some confessing to do.

I stumbled on a word from God yesterday as I was shopping. I was in the home goods section, and there was a little sign that you put up in your house or office. It said, "I'm sorry about what I said when I was hungry."

And while it's not the perfect way to apologize—it does a bit of excuse-making—it's certainly better than, "I'm sorry if what I said offended you."

I'm sorry about what I said when I was hungry.

Can anyone else relate to this?

Today, we hear that Jesus is in the wilderness, for 40 days, accompanied by the Spirit of God, where he hasn't eaten a single bite the entire time.

I get cranky when I get through the day not having had a chance to eat. I can only imagine how unpleasant I would be to be around if I'd gone 39 more days.

Of course, at that point, delirium might have set in. Talking to myself, hallucinations, delusions. Who knows?

That's certainly one way people explain this story. Especially we high-minded mainline liberal denominations. We have a good eye for catching the moments that science can easily make sense of today. Demon-possession? Oh, that's a psychiatric condition. A talking devil with accompanying visions of grandeur? Why that's starvation-induced hallucinations. A story of a man swallowed by a whale? Oh, that's just Pinocchio.

I'm not going to try to persuade you here, but I'll just say that when we're so quick to dismiss the supernatural, we miss out on the richness of stories like these. Yes, they tell us

more about ourselves, and even Jesus' own humanity. But a story like this offers us much more of a glimpse of the God within humanity.

Immediately before this passage in Luke's Gospel, the author lists one of those boring genealogies. They're actually really important to the arc of the book, but of course they lack the riveting pieces that create narratives.

The way that ends though is like this:

You have so and so, the son of so and so, who's the son of so and so—with apologies to the women, especially on the weekend of international women's day, but one thing I'll say as an aside: throughout these temptations, the devil, whom will get to later, is debating Jesus with Scripture. He is twisting it to cause Jesus to misinterpret and misapply the words of God. Instead, Jesus responds with more Scripture. So let me say this: for far too long, our churches and societies have twisted the words of God in order to misapply, demean, and oppress women. Just because the culture of Jesus' day tried to devalue and diminish women, does not mean that God does or wants any of us to, certainly not our churches. When we seek harm to any of God's children, sons or daughters, by dismissing or neglecting them, we are sinning against them and against God, and we are guilty of the same misinterpretation as the devil in this story.

So, as we look back at Luke's Gospel, listen beyond the cultural patriarchy that elevated men above women, and hear something more universal in Luke's message:

Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methusaleh,

Son of Enoch, son of Jared,

Fast forward in our text,

Which because his genealogy is going backwards, is really to rewind all the way to the very beginning

The son of Seth, the son of Adam,

As in Adam and Eve,

The son of God.

All of those men's names as a way of saying Jesus is a descendent of humanity universally, All of whom are children of God.

Which has not made it to the latest update on Ancestry.com yet. Descendants of God. I hear the new version might though.

Luke is making some key theological points here.

Right before this genealogy that comes right before today's temptation story, Luke shares the story of Jesus' baptism in which God from heaven says, "You are my Son, whom I love," and then it's followed up with Jesus' ancestry that goes all the way back to Adam (somewhat unscientifically),
And then to God...Son of God.

And now we enter our scene again this morning, and Jesus, filled with the Spirit of God after his baptism, goes out into the wilderness, in an echo of the wandering people of Israel during their exodus in the wilderness for 40 years, and it's here that the devil says right off the bat, "If you are the son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

These temptations, while located within the depths of his humanity, his desire for food, for power, for wealth, for whatever humans strive for, for Jesus and his adversary—that's what "devil" translates as, the "adversary"—these temptations reveal less about his humanity and more about his identity as the son of God.

God just called him Son, beloved, and here he is being challenged. Will Jesus believe it?

Maybe the adversary is a literary technique here instead of an actual figure, fine. Believe whatever you need to about that part because that's not where we should be focusing. If we do, we miss the point. The temptation is real either way you look at it. It plays out throughout the gospel stories. Who do you say that I am? That's a question Jesus often asks. Who do people say that I am? You're the messiah, the son of God, they would say. And then he'd respond, good, don't tell anyone.

Time and again, Jesus is weighing his identity against his mission, all within the context of how threatening that was to the power structures in which he was living.

Because these temptations, turning stones to bread, they're no big deal to a deity with magical powers; and that's part of the point. Jesus isn't that kind of God. He isn't self-serving. What does he say later? I didn't come to be served, but to serve.

I've been to the area in Israel where people like to say the temptations occurred. I was struck by how *many* rocks litter the ground. It's not like a desert with a rock or two every few miles. They are rocks everywhere. One temptation to turn a stone to bread would mean nearly every step was a reminder that he could and should try it.

The Sojourn of God

Luke 4:1-13

Brent Newberry

March 10, 2019

The First Sunday in Lent

Which is what God's sojourn with humanity must have been like. A continuous temptation to wield power in ways that we would expect any superhero to do: zap the villains and save the helpless, and throw a few cars around just because you can; bring in a new world order under the auspices of strength as intimidation and amazement as fear.

But Jesus isn't a superhero, no matter how much we want him to be. He doesn't ride in on white horses, but instead in a few weeks, on a donkey. He doesn't heal the masses and feed the world; he's exceptionally controlled in his miracles. He isn't the messiah the people of Israel have longed for since their exile hundreds of years before, who will overthrow Rome and sit on the throne, ushering in a new Israel; he will die, executed by the State, as a sacrifice to appease the powers that were.

That's the kind of God he was.

God was on a sojourn with humanity from within humanity in Jesus, not to rule in human definitions of power and strength, but to liberate with true power, which is weakness to so many,

that is:

vulnerability,

compassion,

service,

fairness,

equality,

love.

He didn't come to capitalize on his divinity, but to show us how to live in the fullness of our humanity, which is to lay down our lives, our priorities, our impulses, our desires to all too often elevate ourselves over and above everyone else, even and especially at their expense.

The Way of Christ, that we as a church profess to follow in our mission statement, is a way of sacrifice,

is a way of service,

is a way of making ourselves vulnerable to the riskiness of love.

Yes, Jesus could have fed himself, but what kind of God only looks out for herself?

Yes, he could've healed everyone and saved Israel by force, but what would that be to us, we who are Gentiles?

Yes, he could've called 10,000 angels to save him from the cross, but how would we ever know that God is with us in our bleakest and most hopeless moments?

By embodying divinity, Jesus was locating us within the broader story of God by reminding us that
no matter where we are,
no matter what we are experiencing,
no matter how far away God seems,
God is right there with us in the thick of it.

Like God's always been.
And like God always will be.

Through these sacred stories to be sure, but through the Spirit of God within each of us, within each of you, within your stories and narratives and lived experiences, each one a glimpse of God's presence with us, of God's continuing vulnerability with us, of God's Way forward.

Jesus didn't turn the stones to bread. The whole premise was faulty from the beginning: *if* you are the son of God, tell the stone to become bread. *If* you are the son of God, prove it.

But Jesus already knew. God spoke those words of belovedness already, and they were what sustained him. Humans don't live by bread alone, but by the words of God.

I wonder if he didn't convert the temptation into an affirmation the rest of his 40 days, so that with each stone, instead of doubting his identity as the son of God, he instead reminded himself of those words of belovedness:

I am the son of God.
I am God's beloved.
I am God's child.
I don't live by bread alone, but by the words of God.

Church,
You are God's beloved.
You are children of God.

The Sojourn of God

Luke 4:1-13

Brent Newberry

March 10, 2019

The First Sunday in Lent

You don't live by bread alone, but by the words of God.

You have rocks in your hands that you received as you walked in. These will journey with you during this season of Lent. As you carry your stone with you this week, let it be a reminder to you when you are tempted to turn insecurities into false security, when adversaries tempt you to forget your *own* identity in God or someone else's:

You are God's beloved.

You are children of God.

You are not alone.

God is with you.

God is within you.

God is within each and every one of you.

You don't live by bread alone, but by the words of God.

Amen.