

Title: Devilish Questions
Text: Luke 4: 1 – 13
Date: March 10, 2019

So I wish you all a Happy Lent - that season of 40 days where together we reflect on what worms we all are. (Opps. Wrong church.)

Though using different texts on different years, the first Sunday of Lent always begins with this story of Jesus in the Wilderness. I know most of you have heard the story many times, and so my challenge is to help you look at it from a different angle.

I find it striking how this story - that in some sense signals God's incursion into Satan's territory, and makes us imagine a conflict between unseen forces on a spiritual plane - is often reduced to small-minded tips for living. Many a message is being preached this very morning on handling temptation.

To give you a taste of what you are missing, I am reminded of a story I once found in an esteemed journal called Readers' Digest about someone facing temptation. An overweight businessman decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake, which made people ask what happened. He explained. **"I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a special promotion. I felt it was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open right in front.' And sure enough, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"**

Of course, more high-minded sermons will be less cute and focus on Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness - the first to economic power, the second to military / political power, and the third to religious power. Indeed, there is much value to this angle as we reflect not only on Jesus, but also on our own culture's temptations to consumerism and empire. I have followed this trail before, and I have also explored the gifts of wilderness times.

So this year? I've explained my thought process before. Step One - Guess what people are expecting to hear. Step Two - Do something different. After all, if all I do is tell you what you are already expecting to hear, where is the motivation to get out of bed?

There is a common device that preachers use sometimes: **"Where do you find yourself in this story?"** For example, if you are preaching about the Parable of the Prodigal Son, you might say, "How many of you identify with the younger son? How many of you identify with the older brother? How many of you identify with the father?" This can be a useful approach.

So if we are using this approach with this morning's story we could say, **"Where do you find yourself in this story?"** I suspect most of us would say, **"Gee, I can identify with Jesus. I too go through times of testing and temptation!"** Well if that is your knee-jerk response, my challenge then is to get us to approach this story in a fresh way.

I would like to suggest a different option. Rather than going with *the expected* line of thinking, try this on for size. Consider, if you will, that you are the devil in this story. Bet you didn't see *that* coming! So in what ways might we be - forbid the thought - like the devil in this story? Actually, I can think of several ways!

I heard one scholar reflecting on this passage suggest that we might be led astray a bit when thinking of this merely as being “tempted,” as though it was all about approaching Jesus in a moment of weakness, when he was hungry, when he was susceptible to wavering. He suggests that translating this as a “test” might be preferred. I have gained respect for the way we find this in the NRSV translation. Here the devil is described as “testing” Jesus, as opposed to “tempting” Jesus. In fact, this passage concludes with, **“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”** (Luke 4:13)

Who amongst us has never put God to the test? We think we know a thing or two, and imagine ourselves to be amongst the most clever of prosecuting attorneys. Who amongst us has not thought something along the lines of, **“You say you are supposed to be a God of love. How is it, then, that there is so much starvation and suffering in the world? Seriously! If you are an all-powerful God you could turn these stones into bread!”**

Who amongst us has never thought – on some level – that if God only did “thus and such” for me, then I will praise this God. In other words, if God will ultimately recognize that it is “all about me,” *then* I will go on the road and say how fabulous this God is. God, won’t you help me get that promotion, help me get that house, help my child get into that prestigious college? . . . *then* I will worship you, and let the world know how great you are. God, if you heal my son, *then* I will worship you. Just listen to the teaching of some of the prosperity gospel preachers on TV, and you will find a carefully crafted religion designed around the individual . . . not around God.

Who amongst us has not pulled out a scripture verse to argue our case before God? That is exactly what is going on beginning in verse 9. The devil says, **“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written . . .”** and he then proceeds to quote a couple of scripture passages. What a fundamental misuse of scriptures, reducing it to nothing more than a code book to be argued over. That is exactly the path that the Pharisees were on when they developed layer upon layer of interpretation.

And as we have been reminded this past week, sometimes it is whole groups of people who proceed to quote a couple of scripture passages to shape God in their image – to fashion a God who is seemingly obsessed with sexuality, and incapable of handling ambiguity.

Though few of you are familiar with the name, I am a fan of Clarence Jordan – a New Testament scholar who founded Koinonia Farms, an interracial Christian community in Georgia that gave birth to Habitat for Humanity. He speaks of an unusual etymology for the word *diabolos* (devil) in this passage. He says in *The Substance of Faith*:

“‘Diabolos’ comes from *dia* meaning ‘around / through’ and *bollo* meaning ‘to throw.’ Our English word ‘ball’ comes from that. Diabolos means ‘one who throws things about’—one who stirs things up—gets them confused. The work of the devil is just to get us muddled.”

Does that not sound like each of us sometimes? If we are honest with ourselves, I bet we have all been guilty at times of being The Great Confuser – the one who scatters things about, stirs things up, accusing others of not conforming to the God of our own image.

Taking a big picture look at this passage, there really are a couple of grand directions we can take. We could look at Jesus being portrayed as a superhero. Whatever the devil throws His way, he can take it. Likewise - and this is indeed unsettling – we can reflect on the various ways in which we are guilty of trying to keep God in a box . . . of presuming that we have this mysterious Ground of Being all figured out.

So here is my invitation to you this Lent: Rather than investing more energy into presuming to have God all figured out, maybe spend some more time simply sitting before God, and allowing God's presence to shape us. Perhaps this was a motivating factor for Jesus – full of the Holy Spirit – being led into the wilderness. It does not appear that he was on a quest for more answers. This was not a Vision Quest. He was being strengthened by simply Being. As Elijah discovered: **“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”** (I Kings 19:11-12) And *that* is where Elijah heard God's voice.

Here is another invitation to you this Lent: Stop reading the Bible as though it were a Constitution, or a simple answer book. Start reading the Bible for what it is – a diverse library of our ancestors in the faith as they were trying to figure things out, and as the nature of God was becoming progressively more clear to them. None of them had fully arrived. They were all on a path . . . and some of them seemed to have a knack for contributing a measure of confusion.

So here is another invitation to you this Lent: Perhaps there are gifts to be discovered that are greater than a self-actualized, victorious, abundant life. Perhaps God's presence will be enough even in the midst of loss of status, loss of health, loss of loved ones, and finally even in the loss of life itself, when our ego-structure dissolves into all that is, when we finally let go of all of our expectations of how things are supposed to be.

Does that sound like too lofty a goal for this Lent? Perhaps. But here is an encouraging word of prophesy for you. My belief is that each and every one of you will eventually achieve that goal! Isn't that Good News? My hope and prayer is that you may realize that end long before your final breath. Some say that is the hope of Lent: learning to die before you die.

But that will never be achieved while you are still trying to trip God up with your devilish questions.

Amen.

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.