

Luke 4:1-13

Acting for Christ

When you think of the devil or Satan, what image is conjured up in your mind? For many the first thing that comes to mind is a red skinned man with horns and a pitch fork. Much of our imagination about Satan or the devil comes from folklore and movies. Some of that folklore comes from conflated images from an 14th century narrative poem call *The Divine Comedy* and the first of the three parts called *Dante's Inferno*. This part of the poem is a fictional account of Dante's journey through Hell. None of what we think of as the devil is biblical. In fact, it might be said that the devil shows up in the bible in ways that are actually attractive, or appealing, and enticing rather than being frightening.

If you think on the first story of temptation that we read about in the Bible, the tempter is a serpent. Adam and Eve certainly don't appear to be afraid of the serpent, there was nothing to fear in the Garden of Eden. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve with power, the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, the serpent tempts Adam and Eve with power and who doesn't like to have even a little power. None of us likes to be powerless. There is something very appealing about having power, and one need not look too far in our world to understand how power can be used for both good and evil.

The story before us today is that of Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism where "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22) This is significant because as Jesus entered into this time of testing, he knew that he was the Son of God. He didn't go to the dessert to find himself. He went there to prepare for his life of ministering to people. And there are so many details in this story. If you look at it, Jesus was tempted for the forty days by the devil, but it was at the end, when Jesus was famished that the devil really took aim.

Something else to note before we go further. We have understood this time in the dessert to be one of temptation, yet there is a understanding through new scholarship that now translates this Greek word to *testing* rather than *temptation*. This could be significant to our perspective about this story. The last thing that may be helpful is to look at this as a story unique to Jesus. So often this passage of scripture has been used to say to us, "Jesus was able to face temptation successfully by using scripture so you should be able to as well. Just trust God and you can get through it." Please remember that not one of us would likely make it through this testing with flying colours. We are not Jesus.

There is value in remembering that scripture has power to teach and lead us, but each of us will fall into temptation or fail in times of testing. For some of us it happens daily even when we so desire to do and be better. Still, the life-changing part of this story or the Good News may be simply to know that this story is one in which we are assured of the power of Jesus and the knowledge that he truly was the Messiah, God made flesh, in whom we can and do put our trust.

Let's now turn to each of the tests and ponder them in terms of Jesus learning more about what it meant to be God made flesh doing the work of God in and among people. As we consider this first test remember that Jesus was famished as 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.'"

This first test is about being fed. It is certainly a personal test, yet it is significant that Jesus refused to be tempted into feeding himself, yet he spends much of his ministry feeding people. Jesus makes sure that people have real bread, something they can sink their teeth into, but also spiritually feeds those who are hungering for meaning and purpose, value and hope. Jesus continues to feed us and we are called to feed others both actual food and spiritual food, sharing our faith and hope in Jesus.

For the second test "the devil led Jesus 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.'"

This one really hits home in the ways we have witnessed power expressed from the White House over the President of the Ukraine in the last couple of weeks. Now, I am not going to push that analogy to far, but it does speak to power. The devil wanted to be worshipped and the testing was whether or not Jesus would worship the devil rather than God. And Jesus said, no thanks. For Jesus, power to rule was not about power over others, but rather to rule the world with justice and mercy. This kind of power comes from God alone. As human beings we have more examples than we need to see how power is used over others rather than for the good of others. The power of Jesus belongs squarely in the realm of God's authority. To serve the power of the world, even for good purposes, would mean risking serving something or someone less than God.

For us it means using any power or authority we have over another, whether as a parent, a healthcare professional, a teacher, a caregiver, a politician, a boss, or other person of authority, even the power we have over ourselves, we are to use our power to usher in an age of care and compassion, a time of justice and mercy. We can do that within the sphere of influence we have within our families, homes, friendship circles, businesses and church. Really, anywhere you find yourself you can work to change the world into a more just and compassionate place for the good of all.

The third and final testing was when “the devil took Jesus 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.’”

Jerusalem is where Jesus’ ministry would culminate with his death and resurrection. The devil was pushing timelines here. If he can make Jesus take control now and make God act in this moment than the devil shows what kind of power he has to make God act. But Jesus will not put God to the test. Jesus chose the way of faith, knowing that God acts in God’s own time. There is much work that needs to be done and Jesus will do the work he is called to do as Messiah. Jesus will build the relationship bridge with God so that each of us can know God who created us in God’s image and so that we may know the love, grace, forgiveness, and promise of God with us now and always.

As you can see, each of these temptations or tests were designed to be attractive and enticing in order to lure Jesus away from God. There was nothing frightening about these tests. Each was meant to make Jesus believe that he could be greater and more powerful if he traded his identify as the Son of God to claim the world’s power. Jesus would not take the bait. Each test was intended to put into question how Jesus would respond to the social, political, and religious power offered to him. Instead of falling into temptation or failing the tests, Jesus lived out his answer of refusing to bow to false power.

I close with a paragraph from a commentary on this scripture as written by theologian Sharon Ringe. She writes,

In Luke’s account of the passion and of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the meaning of Jesus’ baptismal omission unfolds, recalling the three tests he has undergone. Though he refused to turn stones into bread, he does feed the hungry. Though he refused political power, the proclamation of God’s empire of justice and peace is the focus of his preaching and teaching. Though he refused to jump off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, he goes to the cross in confidence that God’s will for life will trump the world’s decision to execute him. Game, Set, and Match to Jesus! ¹

As we start this Sunday moving into the season of Lent, a time that leads us to the cross and then to resurrection, be assured that the one who we are following is powerful and acts for our benefit. Jesus as Messiah has changed the world and can transform us. In Jesus we can know our value and the value of each person. In the power of the Holy Spirit we are the ones who now live out the justice and mercy of God in the world.

¹ Ringe, Sharon H. *Feasting on the Word: Year C Volume 2 Lent through Eastertide*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2009. P49.

This story is one about power, the power of Jesus and in whose name we too can act to feed others, refuse political power that does not practice principals of justice and peace, while having confidence that God's will is that all may have life and have it in abundance.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.