

“OUT TO GET JESUS: I – THE DEVIL”

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1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

One of the best things about being in ministry is being a part of baptisms. They're wonderful – whether it's the baptism of a baby, a child, a youth or an adult. It's a high, holy moment for the person being baptized or for all witnessing it; a visual and vivid reminder that that person is a beloved child of God, watched over by God, loved by God, empowered by God. It's a moment when the community surrounds that person and says, in essence, “We are with you today and will be with you all the days to come.”

There is no doubt that Jesus' own baptism was a high and holy moment too. In fact, it was incredible, because in his case, after he was baptized by John in the River Jordan, and he was praying, the heavens opened up, the Spirit descended like a dove, and God himself spoke, telling Jesus, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

What a moment! Incredible! So what might Jesus have expected to come next? Clearly, now, he was being sent into ministry with God's blessing. Clearly, now, he knew that God was pleased with him, that God loved him, that he was precious, special, beloved.

So what might he have expected to come next? Maybe to go forth into a little village and begin teaching and healing – to touch lives with the message of God's love for them? You might expect that, and maybe he did, as well.

Instead, the Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, sent him into the wilderness – the dry, dusty, barren wilderness – all by himself – for forty days and forty nights. No food, no companions, just complete solitude – for forty days and forty nights.

After that high, holy moment of glory in his baptism, now he gets the wilderness, and in it he gets a taste of what's to come – people being, not for him, but against him – and his first taste of that comes in the form of the devil.

Remember now, Jesus has been in the wilderness for forty days by then with no food – and he is famished. You know what you feel like when you haven't eaten all day – how starved you feel, and often too, how irritable you become? Multiply that by forty, that's where Jesus was – and that's when the devil pounced.

And he jumped right on the hunger. “Come on Jesus, you don’t have to be hungry anymore. If you are who you say you are, come on, turn these stones into bread.” Underneath those words was an unspoken message as well, I think – “You know Jesus, if God really loved you, you wouldn’t be starving. He would have fed you. But if you are who you say you are, do it yourself – turn these stones into bread.” Oh, how tempting it must have been for Jesus to know that, in an instant, his physical hunger could be gone.

Well, when that didn’t work, the devil went on to plan B. He showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and said “This could all be yours, Jesus. I’ll give it to you – all you have to do is worship me.” Underneath those words too, was an unspoken message as well, I think – “You know Jesus, if God really loves you, and you’re so beloved like he says, and he’s so pleased with you, then you would already have all this – but you don’t, it’s mine.” He’s trying to get Jesus to doubt God.

And when that too doesn’t work, the devil goes on to plan C. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and tests him once more. “Okay, Jesus, if you are the Son of God, let’s just see. Let’s just see what happens if you throw yourself off of this pinnacle. Let’s just see if God rescues you.” There’s no need to go underneath those words, because the message is crystal clear – the devil is trying to get Jesus to doubt his father’s love for him.

Three times – three temptations the devil threw at Jesus – and each one was based on fear – fear that he would starve, fear that he wouldn’t have enough, fear that God didn’t love him enough.

You know, I think we tend to trivialize temptation. We like to joke about it – “the devil made me do it,” we talk about it especially during Lent when we try to resist the temptations of chocolate, or caffeine, or alcohol, or social media – or whatever. But, as one writer put it, “Temptation is a weightier issue. Because (indeed) the heart of the issue of temptation is fear, our fear of hunger, our fear of running out, our fear of the future, our fear that only we can help ourselves and we are overwhelmed, our fear that we are dying, our fear of death itself. (He continues) If you think of the temptations that Jesus endured, the heart of them all is the suggestion that death has more power than God and we are left here to fend for ourselves against overwhelming odds. Our suspicion is that God doesn’t have any real power in this world, and if that’s so, then we’re on our own and we really do have something to fear.” (On-line, Jon Walton, “An Opportune Time,” Feb. 12, 2010)

Wow, that’s pretty heavy stuff, but he’s right. The temptations we face, whether they’re eating chocolate, or having an affair, or cheating on our taxes – are all about fear – that what we have isn’t enough and we want more.

Do you remember hearing about the new pastor who came to town, and decided that in order to get to know the town better, he would ride the city bus? It went right by his new church. So he got on the bus, sat down, and when he did he

realized that the bus driver has given him a quarter too much in change. He thought to himself, “What should I do? I should give it back, but then it’s only a quarter. Why worry about such a small amount? No one will ever know; no one will even miss it.”

Well, when it came time to get off the bus, the moment of truth arrived. The pastor did the right thing. He said to the driver, “Excuse me, sir. But you gave me too much change when I got on the bus. Here – here’s the quarter.”

Do you know what the driver said back? “I know I did. I did it on purpose. I recognized you when you got on the bus. I was in your church last Sunday. I’ve been thinking about joining your church, and I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change. I guess it was wrong of me to test you like that, Reverend, but you passed with flying colors! I’ll see you Sunday!”

The pastor got off the bus and almost went down on his knees, because in his heart, he realized that he had almost sold Jesus out for twenty-five cents! (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul That Only God Can Fill*,” p. 45.

Temptation – building on that man’s fear that he didn’t have enough. You see, it doesn’t have to be huge stuff – even twenty-five cents was tempting.

And like he did with Jesus, sometimes the devil comes at us with the taunt that we **ourselves** aren’t enough – we need to be more – be more than we are – and he does that in wily ways as well.

Did any of you ever see the movie with Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway called “The Devil Wears Prada”? Here’s a prime example of what the temptation to be more than we are looks like. Meryl Streep is a high-powered fashion magazine editor, who seemingly rules the world in that area. She has everything – glamour, power, money, attention. Everyone gives her everything she wants, and she gets it, because she steps all over everyone all the time.

Along comes Anne Hathaway’s character – a young woman who starts to work with Miranda (Streep’s character). She comes into the company a shy, unassuming, plain dressing young woman who has good friends and is in a serious romantic relationship with her boyfriend. But the more time she spends with Miranda, the more temptation to be more pulls her in – and soon, everything in her life changes. She starts to dress the part, act the part, pull apart from her friends and her boyfriend. The devil has her in his clutches – because she falls for his deceptions hook, line and sinker – and almost loses everything in her life that matters.

Until one day, she has a moment of clarity, and sees that life for what it is – shallow, empty, mean, vapid – and she walks away from it – back to a good and fulfilling life.

Oh how easy it is for us to believe the devil's message – tempting us to believe we're not enough, tempting us to do things we ought not do, and go down paths we ought not travel – just to prove ourselves. It's what makes people take credit for work they didn't do at the expense of co-workers; or treat other people badly, or cheat to get ahead.

So, first the devil tempts us with “you don't have enough,” and then “you aren't enough,” and finally, he tempts us with “you don't do enough.” “Come on Jesus, prove you are who you say you are – turn these stones into bread, jump off of the temple, come on, prove it.” Oh, how we fall for this temptation – to try to prove ourselves – sometimes we practically kill ourselves to do it. We live in a world that almost demands it of us – prove you're worth something, do more, be more, show us more, be better than everybody else – and we fall for it.

I once heard a story that I will never forget, that I'm sure some of you have heard and have never forgotten as well. It's about a businessman who was on vacation and went for a walk down by the pier of a coastal fishing village. He saw a small boat with just one fisherman on it pulling up to the dock, so he went over to talk with him. Inside the boat were several large yellowfin tuna. He complimented the fisherman on his catch and asked him how long it took to catch them.

“Only a little while,” the fisherman said.

“Oh, well then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more fish?” the businessman asked.

“I have enough to support my family's needs.”

“But what do you do with the rest of your time?”

“Oh, I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each night where I sip wine and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life.”

“Hmm,” said the businessman. “You know, I have an MBA from Harvard, and I'll bet I could help you. You know that if you spent more time fishing you could catch more fish and then with the proceeds you could buy a bigger boat. Then you could catch even more fish, and buy even more boats. Pretty soon you could have a whole fleet of boats. Then you could cut out the middleman and sell directly to the processor, and eventually you could buy your own cannery. That way you could control it all – the product, the processing and the distribution. You could leave this little village and move to Mexico City, and then expand to Los Angeles, and New York. You could have a great empire.”

“Well, how long would all that take?” the fisherman asked.

“Oh, probably fifteen to twenty years.”

“Then what?”

“Well, that’s the best part,” the businessman replied. “When the time is right, you make a public offering of your company stock and you would become very rich, probably a multi-millionaire.”

“Then what?” the fisherman asked.

“Oh, well then, you could retire and move to a little coastal village where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with your grandkids, take a siesta with your wife, and stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play guitar with your friends.”

Oh, my – if that isn’t the devil speaking, I don’t know what is. Playing on the fear that you’re not enough just as you are – oh how wily he can be, and how easily we fall into his clutches in this world in which we live.

Temptation, my friends, is all around us. The devil appeals to our fears, and tempts us to try to have more, be more, do more – and every time he’s successful, we move one step further away from God and trusting in God. We would do well to remember what Jesus did in the wilderness – how he said “no” over and over again. No matter how much the devil tried to weaken him, no matter how wily the devil was in trying to thwart Jesus’ mission, Jesus said “no” every time. He leaned on what he knew – holy scripture – scriptures that spoke again and again about the sovereignty, the power, the love of God. And more than that, he trusted God, he trusted in God’s love for him, and he trusted that in God, he had not just enough, but more than enough – all that he needed all the time.

And so, when the devil kept coming at him – or as the scripture says – at an opportune time – particularly later on, just before and when he was put to death on the cross – even then, Jesus was able to say “no” to the devil and “yes” to God

You see, God is enough, and God gives us enough. We need to trust that, just as Jesus did. We need to trust that God loves us as his precious children, and we have no need to fear.

Now, I don’t know what temptations you’re facing, I only know mine. But I do know this, we all face them all the time. The devil is still trying to work his magic 24/7. All I know is that, when he comes our way, when he tries to lure us with temptation, which he will, we need to do as Jesus did – know and speak the Word, lean on God, trust in God – and just say “No, get behind me, Satan.” Just say no.

May it be so.

Amen.