



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

First Sunday of Lent
Identity Theft

Luke 4.1–13

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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 only God.'"

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.

The character of evil, the nature of Christ, the power of temptation; each one of these ideas has been named, over time, as a possible theme for these verses in Luke's Gospel. It's all there—irresistible drama, full of possibilities. And this story often serves as the scripture lesson for the first Sunday in Lent.

When a fellow clergywoman's son was just shy of four years old, he heard this very story in children's church! The storyteller was quite skilled and the children were captivated by the high excitement. Later that day, her son pulled his mother aside and asked, "Hey, mommy, what do you know about the devil?" Not something asked everyday by a 3-year-old. And she said that her clergy mind went to a spectrum of theological views and theodices (which means something like "the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the

2 existence of evil.”) And then a reality check—he was only 3 years old. She asked in a classic mom mode “What do you know about the devil?” “Well,” he began, “the devil talked to Jesus. And the devil was mean.” At this point my friend was feeling pretty good that her young son had listened well enough to remember this much.

Then the little boy continued a mimicking re-tell of the story. He leaned in and dropped his voice to a loud whisper and said, “If we were in a store, and you and daddy were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and—there was candy”he paused for effect. “The devil would say...You should take some!”

Out of the mouths of babes. We all know what it is to be tempted. I did a Google search of “pictures of temptations” to share this morning and here’s what I found. But...there were a lot of images that were unsuitable to show this morning or any morning. Lesson learned...better to stick to cats and dogs!

The Greek word for devil here in Luke is *diabolos*, an adjective meaning “prone to slander.” This *diabolos* offers Jesus three temptations.... bread, power, safety. In today’s text, the devil tries to seduce Jesus with the guarantee of

- bread when he’s hungry,
- the glory and power of all the world’s leaders
- and the promise of safety, as if God couldn’t or wouldn’t keep Jesus safe.

Bread. Power. Safety. It’s easy to understand how someone might be tempted. I suppose it could have been some other things—maybe fame, beauty and wealth. Or confidence, youth and security, you name it. Perhaps it is not really so much about the temptations themselves, as appealing as they might be, as it is about the underlying nature of temptation.

I wonder, when we really think about it, if temptation does not always draw us toward something...like we were drawn to those cupcakes on top of the refrigerator last Sunday, or the

cookie within striking distance of Pugs's cute little nose or the fish in Kitty's vase. Like something we know we shouldn't do or have, but find so irresistible. Maybe...temptation is not always luring us TO something. Maybe temptation moves us away from something, something that very well might be in our best interest, that might be a better way. Maybe temptation here is about moving us away from our relationship with God and the identity that is ours as followers of Jesus way, as diabolos whispers in our ear.

Take note that in this scripture story, each temptation seeks to corrode and undermine Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God. Here's the interesting part. Jesus, being Jesus... picks up on this. Which is why, when he is offered bread, he responds with an affirmation of trust in God. Even more transparent, the next temptation offers Jesus the power of the worlds' leaders in return for Jesus' allegiance and worship. But again, Jesus knows that his allegiance can only be given to the one from whom it is received. Lastly, the devil proposes that God is not trustworthy and prods Jesus into testing that relationship. But Jesus resists.

In each case, the devil seeks to undermine Jesus' confidence both in himself and in God. The devil tries to erode Jesus' certainty that he is enough, that he is worthy of God's love and that he is held in God's loving hands. In response to each of these temptations, Jesus quotes scripture (found in Deuteronomy) in order to remind himself, and the devil, that he is a part of a much bigger story. After each temptation—bread, power and safety—Jesus, steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, seals his rootedness as God's child. Jesus is reminded not only that he has enough and is enough but that he is of infinite worth in the eyes of God.

Temptations are around us every day as they seek to shift our allegiance, our trust and our confidence away from God and toward some substitute, some "diabolos," that appears to promise a more secure identity. It's clear to me then, that this passage is about identity theft. It's not only the devil's failed

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attempts to lure Jesus from his identity in God but it extends throughout all of history and attempts to rob us of our identity as God's children.

What might be the messages that are around us every day, that tempt us every day and threaten. These messages instill in us a sense of deficiency ...we aren't good enough, smart enough, young enough, old enough, rich enough, thin enough, clever enough, articulate enough—you name it. We are tempted to give in and believe...that we are inadequate.

God loves us and will keep loving us no matter what and for that very reason...we are enough. This is a message that we need to hear often to counter the things that might tempt us and rob us of our identity. We gather together to renew and restore our identity as God's beloved children.

That's true for us as individuals, and it's also true for us as a faith community. We have been called by God to be the Beloved Community, as articulated by MLK. This is a great place to be—exciting things are happening here. This congregation is growing and we are on the move. In fact, I heard one long-time member recently answer the question “when were the golden days of this congregation?” with a confident “Right Now.”

And so as we begin our Lenten journey, this is a good time for us as a faith community to consider what temptations might be preventing us from even more fully claiming our identity in God. We plan to spend some time this Lent in the book of Luke and beyond, to the book of Acts and the story of the early church. These writings can inspire and instruct us as our fore-mothers and fathers claimed their identity as a people of God.

In the very opening verses of Acts, we read these instructions to Jesus' followers: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*¹

¹Acts 1.8

In a nutshell the early church's call from God, was to be witnesses. The task of the Christian church, then, and still is, to be "witnesses" to Jesus. To be witnesses is to bring forward into our time and place, the truth of the gospel. Just as our gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each took the words, teachings, actions, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and brought them to bear in their particular time and communities, so, today the church's essential call, and task, is to bear witness to what God has done and is continuing to do in Jesus. It is the outpouring of grace and healing, this victory over the myriad powers of death at work, in the world, and in us—to witness to the power of Jesus to heal all that distorts, disfigures and diminishes God's dream for life...God's Shalom and God's reign, here and now. The church exists to bear witness to that new world coming and to be the beachhead of that new world in the midst of the old.²

Let's circle back around to Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Bread. Power. Safety. The very things that the devil used as temptation, became the foundation for Jesus' mission here on earth:

- Though Jesus refused to turn stones into bread in the wilderness, he blesses the loaves and feeds the crowds so that all have enough.
- Though he refused political power, the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace is the very focus of Jesus' preaching and teaching.
- Though he refused to jump off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, knowing what awaits him there, that God's will for life, will trump the world's decision to execute him.

And we are the church—the body of Christ, continuing that work of Jesus. In this season of Lent, we ask, What temptations are robbing us of our identity as God's beloved community?

²Called to Be Church, Anthony B. Robinson and Robert S. Wall, Eerdmans, 2006

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What fears prevent us from living into that beloved community? How can we be that bold witness, with the courage and confidence and hope of the early church? If our call is not to have a mission but to be a mission, how can we prepare and equip ourselves to witness the gospel, the good news, here in this place, in our community... and even far beyond these walls? Who can we invite to join us on this exciting journey?

Lent is from an English word meaning “spring”—not just a reference to the crocuses pushing their way out of the ground in this season before Easter. But also to the greening of the human soul—pruned with repentance, fertilized with fasting, spritzed with self-appraisal, mulched with prayers. Lent isn’t about giving up Hershey bars or Dove candies, or taking on Pilates. Lent is about reminding ourselves and one another, that God loves us and will keep loving us no matter what and for this reason we, individually and collectively, are enough. And we extend that invitation of love to others, ever broadening the circle.

We thought what better time, than at the beginning of Lent, to offer anointing with oil with the words...you are enough. No magical powers, but a symbol of openness to God, claiming our identity as God’s beloved, and commitment to be the body of Christ in bold witness to the world.

All are invited to come forward for anointing—if it is difficult for you to move, please signal us or an usher and we will come to you. *You are God’s beloved. You are enough.*

