

Lent 1C. February 14, 2016. Luke 4:1-13.

One of the techniques I often use to get inside a biblical passage is to ask two questions: what is at stake here; and who are we in this story? And for today's gospel story, some version of which we read on this Sunday every year, my upbringing has ready-made answers. What is at stake is whether Jesus will sin, which has all kinds of theological and redemptive implications. And we, so my upbringing has told me, occupy the place of Jesus in this story: beset on all sides by temptation, but empowered to resist the devil by our memorization of scripture.

I don't think this is totally wrong. We are indeed tempted by bread, which I guess is a metaphor for consumerism, by power, and by safety. The desire for all of these things can draw us away from trusting God. And there's a liturgical logic behind this thinking, too: Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, and we read this passage on the first Sunday of Lent, which is our forty day preparation for Easter. So just as he was in the wilderness for forty days, fasting and wrestling with the devil, so we the church set aside forty days in which we fast and wrestle with devil that is chocolate or alcohol or nicotine or soda pop.

That all makes sense and works and is no doubt good and holy. But I don't think it totally covers what is at stake here, at least for Jesus. In the context of Luke, Jesus has just been baptized and now the Holy Spirit leads him out into the wilderness for forty days. We've been reading these stories out of order, but after his baptism, this happens before anything else—before the beginning of his public ministry. What is at stake here for Jesus is not just whether he will commit a discrete sin, although worshipping the devil is obviously a big discrete sin. But even more, what is at stake is what it means to be the Messiah.

At his baptism just before this, a voice comes down from heaven and says "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And what follows in the wilderness isn't a test to see if Jesus was worthy of that title and that love. This is the moment when Jesus chooses what it is going to mean to be the Beloved Son of God. The love is assured. It has already been given, before Jesus has done anything but show up to get baptized.

So what does it mean to be the Beloved Son of God? What choices does Jesus make, here? They are cast in the story as refusals. In refusing to turn the stone into bread, Jesus refuses the easy answers that make the rigors of following God more gentle. He's out in the wilderness having just completed a fast. Yes, he could prove a point about his power by turning the stone into bread—but that's not how you end a fast. You have to go back to town and get some bread, that's how a fast ends. There is a kind of patience to following after God that simply can't be skipped. Miracles are not shortcuts.

Second, Jesus refuses to accept worldly power. This is the only temptation that involves a condition—I'll give you all this if you worship me. But I don't think that Jesus would have taken the bait even if there were no strings attached. It turns out that there are always strings attached to claiming power over other people's lives. And, insert political joke here about Satan being in charge of who runs national governments. But the way of Jesus is not the way of claiming power over others. Our God is a god who persuades, rather than coerces, who invites love, rather than inciting fear. This way is, of course,

much harder. With all power and authority, Jesus wouldn't be crucified. But if the choice is between coercion and suffering, the way of the Messiah goes through suffering.

And finally, Jesus refuses to ask for an assurance of his protection. I'm sure that Satan is right, and that God would bail him out if he threw himself off this great height. The devil is, after all, citing scripture for his purpose. And at the start of his public ministry, Jesus would then know that whatever mess he got himself into, a bunch of angels would always be on hand. But the way of God's Beloved is not the way of assured protection—eschewing political power over others, it also embraces a life of risk. Not recklessness, not foolhardiness, but a willingness to set aside security for the sake of what must be done. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, refusing to demand an assurance of protection at the beginning of his ministry frees Jesus to take necessary action without regard for the safety of such action. The way of Jesus involves risk, and security is not a prominent value.

So these are the choices that Jesus makes about what it means to be the Beloved Son of God, and this is certainly part of what is at stake here. So who are we in this story? Obviously, we're here because we want to follow the way of Jesus, so it's perfectly reasonable to put ourselves in his place. And these choices should be very familiar to us: the longing for shortcuts through our grief, our suffering, those simply darned difficult periods when we know very clearly what we need, but it just won't come. The temptation to abandon persuasion and love in favor of the seemingly easier force, coercion, and manipulation. And the deep desire before beginning a dangerous undertaking to make absolutely sure that we are safe.

But just as often—and I say this with all due respect—we find ourselves in the place of the devil: not just abandoning the harder and more beautiful way of Jesus, but trying to recruit God to do the same. So many of my prayers are for shortcuts, rather than for patience. And when we as a people use force, how often do we manage not to do it in the name of God, or one of our favorite aliases for God, such as freedom or progress? Or, we are ready to harm others because we are sure that God wants us to be safe.

I don't mean this sermon as a big condemnation of our struggles to resist these temptations, our tendency to choose paths other than those chosen by Jesus. Instead, I want to emphasize that Jesus was able to choose these harder and more beautiful paths because he had already been assured that he was the Beloved Son of God. And, my friends, you too are a Beloved Child of God. We do not need the disastrous spiritual shortcuts, power over others, and guarantee of safety because we are as assured of God's love as Jesus was. Yes, I think that we should all choose these paths of the Messiah, which might just be called discipleship. And the surest way into discipleship is to begin by basking in the love of God, by diving in to the depths of our baptism. If you're still pondering how this Lent might help you to become a better Christian, a better disciple, I encourage you to consider starting by trying to believe that you—yes you—are a Beloved Child of God, with whom God is well pleased. Amen.