

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

There probably isn't anyone here today who is not at least vaguely familiar with the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert. It is the scripture passage that opens up for us the season of Lent every year. It's easy to assume that having heard this scripture passage multiple times during our lifetime, there's no more to be gleaned from this story. That's a reasonable assumption to make; but like all passages of scripture, there's always more to be gleaned in every passage when we look hard enough. If we walk gently through this particular gospel passage in Luke, we may be able to spot a thing or two that has not occurred to us before...or perhaps simply hasn't been brought to our attention. At the heart of this scripture passage is the question of how much we trust the Holy Spirit or even God himself.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness at the hands of the devil is a familiar story. The first thing we hear is that after Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, the Holy Spirit then led him out into the wilderness where he stayed for forty days. Those forty days were reminiscent of the forty years that the Israelites spent wandering in the desert while they built their relationship with God. Jesus' power came from his willingness to confidently follow the Holy Spirit into the unknown. That's something that is sometimes hard for us to do. In the wilderness, Jesus had nothing to eat, so at the end of those forty days, he was famished. He was beyond famished. It's hard for us to imagine what kind of hunger we might experience after a 40 day fast, but perhaps the hunger that Jesus experienced is not like anything we would describe as hunger. That's roughly six weeks of eating absolutely nothing. And the temptations presented to Jesus by the devil were presented to him toward the end of his stay in the wilderness...at the end of those forty days...when Jesus was most physically and mentally depleted and when

he was at his most vulnerable. This Jesus is very vulnerable. These temptations are not garden variety temptations, but are targeted on this vulnerable Jesus as Son of God.

Having nearly starved to death, the devil first tempted Jesus by reminding him that he had the power to turn a stone into a loaf of bread...and immediately take care of his aching physical hunger. But Jesus wouldn't do it. As painful as it must have been for him...both physically and psychologically...Jesus did not take the bait from the devil. What he did was to quote scripture to the devil by quoting Deutoronomy 8:3 "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." For Jesus, this sojourn in the desert that so completely depleted him was also a relationship building experience between him and God...between Father and Son...just like the one between Israel

and God...between God and His chosen people. It was never a question of whether or not Jesus had the power to do as the devil tempted him. He definitely had the power. The devil reminded him that since he was the Son of God, he had the power to do just as the devil was suggesting. But the question was what kind of Son to God would Jesus be? When the chips were down, would Jesus use his own power to look out for himself or would he trust God to take care of him? This is as much an exercise in trust in God as it is a temptation for Jesus to use his own power. And Jesus declined to use his own power. He opted to trust God instead. That's the challenge for us as well. Are we willing to trust God in the clinches? Or are we tempted to take matters into our own hands and control the situation all by ourselves? That's the real question. Whose power do we trust? God's or our own? That's not always such an easy question to answer. Even when we know that God has far more power than we do, are we willing to trust God to use that power for our benefit or do we tend to believe that we need to use our own power?

The second temptation from the devil to Jesus is the temptation of receiving kingdoms to rule. It could be argued that the devil doesn't actually have any kingdoms to give away, but stop and think for a moment about the corruption in the Roman Empire. Aren't there just so many in that power structure who have in effect 'sold their souls to the devil' in order to have earthly power in human government constructs? It would be easy to see that the way the Roman Empire operated was a method of operation created by the devil himself, not by God. And even though we know that God's power rules above all, there are circumstances in which God allows evil powers to take charge. The devil, then, takes Jesus up to a high place where they can both peruse the kingdoms below and the devil offers Jesus control over all these territories...even though they don't actually belong to the Devil. Many debate what Luke means by the Diabolic One having received the kingdoms and whether such a statement is true. Even if it is true, these kingdoms that may have been given to the Devil

ultimately belong to the Lord, the Owner or *kurios* of everything. This is true even under the Roman Empire, where the emperor was celebrated as the lord. It could be argued that the Roman Empire itself had been taken over by the Evil One....the Devil who tempts Jesus...as it is ruled and controlled by those who have no sense of justice for all or allegiance to the Creator. Jesus recognizes that if attaining fame requires becoming a servant to the Diabolic One, the cost is too high. And he declines the offer.

The third temptation is as much about tempting God and putting God on trial as it is about anything Jesus might attempt to do. The Diabolic One..the Tempter...the Devil Himself... in his third trial quotes passages from the Psalms. Perhaps this is his response to Jesus quoting from the Hebrew Bible to counter his earlier propositions. The Diabolic One weaves together two psalms to convince Jesus to throw himself down from the highest point of the Jerusalem Temple. In this trial the Diabolic One attempts to get Jesus to put God on trial. The devil takes Jesus to a

high pinnacle on the Temple and challenges him to jump off reminding him that the Psalms have promised that God's angels will protect the Son of God and prevent his foot from stumbling. Now the devil returns to "if" in the first sense: "If" you are the Son of God OR "since" you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here and show me and all of Jerusalem what you've got. Provoke God's action in your own interest at the Temple — as the Psalms themselves intimate that you are God's own precious concern. Jesus not only turns away this final temptation with another scripture reference, Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. You must diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you." But Jesus turns the tables on this scripture-quoting devil. This last temptation is less a temptation for Jesus than an attempt to tempt *God*. God is not to be managed or provoked, even for the sake of the Son of God.

Each of the three trials that the Diabolic One presents raises a question about power: Jesus' power, the Diabolic One's power, and ultimately God's power. For Luke, the issue is not equivalent to personal temptations around faith, but to Jesus' unique vocation as Spirit-anointed Son of God. Jesus' vocation is grounded in his baptism story with all that the Holy Spirit brought to him: "when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." In Luke's temptation description it is not *whether* Jesus is the Son of God, but *how* he will carry out his Spirit-anointed vocation as Son of God? What kind of Son of God will Jesus be? The issue is about conditions and circumstances. Under what circumstances or conditions will Jesus display or use his power?

And how do we most effectively follow Jesus into the desert and rely on the Holy Spirit and the Lord our God to guide and protect us as we relinquish all our personal power to the Trinity? Lent is not about our

own will power. Lent is not about building up our own resistance to temptation. Lent is about our willingness to relinquish control over our own appetites and put our trust in God, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.

To what extent are we willing to abdicate our own power to the Holy Trinity and trust in God's provision for us?

With God's help, we will be able to put our complete trust in the Trinity.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.