

“Sorting Out Our Baptismal Identity”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
February 21, 2010  
First Sunday of Lent  
Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

In many religious traditions, there is a coming of age ritual in which an adolescent goes out into the wilderness alone. The Native Americans call it a vision quest – a chance to discover what one is made of, to face one’s fears, to find direction. At the crossroads between childhood and adulthood, one goes on a personal, spiritual quest alone in the wilderness, usually fasting to better attune to the spirit world. Often a guardian animal will come in a vision or dream, and the child’s life direction will appear at some point.

After being highly ranked but finishing last in his first Olympic trials speedskater Apolo Ohno’s father and coach sent him alone to a cabin to reflect on his defeat and ponder his future. And after eight days alone, the teenager picked up the phone and said that he would dedicate himself to being a skater. Now he has won more Olympic medals than any other US winter athlete – and he looks like he is having fun. Alone in the wilderness he rediscovered his passion.

Jesus, after fasting and praying, encounters an adversary, a tempter, Satan. It is a contest of epic proportions. Unlike other gospel stories where the action or teaching takes place with others around and the story is passed from humans to other humans, this jousting match occurs in the wilderness with no witnesses. The omniscient narrator gives it a mythical nature. Jesus and the devil do battle, with the winds howling and the hunger pains gnawing, the devil tempts and Jesus responds, with scripture being a shield for Jesus as well as a weapon for the devil.

Theologian Lori Hale writes about her three and a half year old son’s encounter with this Bible story during Sunday School.

Hey mom, he started, what do you know about the devil? My mind [she writes] immediately jumped to a spectrum of theological views . . . Should I start with Augustine? Should I couch my answer in general terms of conservative and progressive or liberal interpretations of the text?

“What do you know about the devil?” I asked in classic mom/professor mode. . . Well, he began, “the devil talked to Jesus.” Good, I thought. He was paying attention. “The devil was mean,” he continued. *Mean*. I began to wonder about the relationship of “mean” to “evil.” Was the devil really mean? Perhaps it is possible to be mean without being evil, but is the opposite true? Is it possible to be evil without being mean? . . .

My musings were cut short as my son continued his hand-me-down exposition of the text. Leaning closer to me and dropping his voice to a loud whisper, he said, “if we were at the store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and” – his hushed tones became downright conspiratorial at this point – “there was candy . . .” He paused for effect. “The devil would say, ‘You should take some!’ . . .

[So she asked him] Honey, if we were at a store, and there was candy, and the devil said, ‘You should take some!’ What would you say back to the devil?”

A genuinely sweet grin lit up his entire face and without hesitation he replied, “Oh, I would say thank you!”<sup>1</sup>

There is both temptation as well as obedience! Luke’s point, is I think, has both depth and some subtlety. Right before this story, Luke tells about Jesus’ baptism. While he is being baptized, a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).<sup>2</sup> Then Luke takes a break in the action to fill in the genealogy of Jesus. It seems like an odd place to insert a genealogy, doesn’t it? Luke doesn’t place it leading up to the birth of Jesus. But between the baptism and this story of Jesus and the devil.

But I think I get why Luke puts it here, and I think this will add some understanding to what is going on with this story of Jesus’ temptation. First the baptism, with the voice saying, “You are my Son, the beloved. Then the genealogy that would make any of our genealogists proud, traces ancestry from Jesus backward, all the way back to “son of Adam, son of God” (Luke 3:38). And then Jesus goes out into the wilderness for forty long days. This is not a vision quest kind of thing, since he already has heard the spiritual voice proclaiming his identity, instead the time alone is not finding himself, but a testing of his identity, announced at his baptism and confirmed in the genealogy.<sup>3</sup> There in the wilderness he meets the devil, whose first words are, “If you are the Son of God.

What follows then is a particular set of three temptations. These are not temptations to do things that are desirable but not good for him. Not like eating a second piece of chocolate cake, or staying up too late to watch the Olympics. Rather these are tests to see whether even good things can lure him from a focus on God’s will.<sup>4</sup> After forty days alone and hungry, the devil said to him (and wish though we could to see what the devil looks like, Scripture is silent). The devil simply speaks to him and takes him to places of possibility.

If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. If he could do this, he could feed the hungry.

“If you then, will worship me,” the devil says, all the kingdoms of the world “will all be yours.” If you are the Son of God, the temptation lingers, you can rule the world with justice.

Then the devil takes him to the pinnacle of the temple and says, If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written “He will command his angels concerning you.” If you are the Son of God, the temptation is, then trust in God’s protection.

It’s not that these are evil temptations! It’s not that these are bad motivations or intentions. But out there in the desert, Jesus has to sort out what he is called to do and how he will do it. He will, after all, feed the hungry. He does rule, we believe, all the kingdoms of the world. God would protect him, though not before he endured the cross.

But out in the wilderness, Jesus faces temptations. Temptation about who to trust to fulfill his baptismal calling. Temptation to take short cuts. Temptation that the ends justify the means.

After forty days out in the wilderness, alone and hungry, Jesus discovers that he is not abandoned. He is filled with the Spirit, and led by the Spirit, and is obedient to his calling even in the face of temptations.

This is a story that has deep resonance. And I do not want to reduce this powerful story in any way; I do not want to tell you that the meaning of the story is this or that. For I think that this story will resonate with us in different ways. Some of us are all too familiar with the wilderness, and the voices we hear when we are alone. For some, temptation is always before them. We all have real temptations, with varying degrees of harmfulness.

This story reminds us that temptations can last a long time. That obedience can be difficult. And when we think we are all alone, we may face not just temptation, but the still, small voice of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit – the Advocate, the Comforter, the Sustainer.

Lent is a time to go out into our own wildernesses. To discover ourselves. To strip away all the pretensions and see the false idols we have created. To remember our baptismal calling.

So we begin the season of Lent with communion. At this table our identity is confirmed, and we allow ourselves to be called God’s beloved welcome children. At this table we sit with other members of the household of God. At this table we feel connections to those who have gone before and those who are afar. Here in this simple, symbolic meal, we are both fed and our deep hungers for welcome and justice are kindled.

*(leading directly into the “Invitation to the Table”)*

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Brandt Hale in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2 – Lent Through Eastertide, David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> See also Matthew 3:13-17 and Mark 1:9-11. Mark and Luke have the voice from heaven saying “You are my beloved . . .” whereas Matthew has a more public pronouncement “This is my beloved Son.”

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Ringe in Feasting on the Word, 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.