

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 34:27-28

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 4:1–14 NRSV

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 serve only him.’” 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.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

Strange Tale: Strange Doings

Can you **recall** the first time you heard these verses, or the fairly similar accounts recorded in *Matthew* and *Mark*? If you are like me, it seemed **very different** to most other stories about Jesus. Even as a child, I know that it always **puzzled** me. So, I imagine that many of you have had the same experience. Because, when you read this **scripture lesson** as an adult, it comes across very differently than it did to our untrained ears in our younger years.

Let’s take this a little further. Can you recall any other portion of scripture that is told in this way? Are any of the other opponents confronting Jesus depicted as a devil in any other portion of the Gospel story? You may recall the **demons**, but none of those are given the status of walking, talking, and posing unexplainable means of transporting themselves, and a companion, to points unknown as we find in this particular scripture lesson today.

There is a lot that we can discuss here. We can start with the Greek word for “devil,” **διαβολος**, which is used for the Hebrew word for a representative: **sa-tán**. This word, *sa-tán*, appears in many portions of the Hebrew scriptures, even some that are not in our *Bible*. In the *Book of Job*, the *sa-tán*, is part of the heavenly court, an image borrowed from other cultures,

and perhaps other religions; and, in *Job*, this other-than-human being stands before God in the court of God. So, just being in the presence of God should mean that this *satán* is not necessarily evil, but actually an advisor to God in this representation of the heavenly court. In the story of *Job*, the *satán* points out to God that the seemingly perfect servant of God, named **Job**, may not be so perfect when put under an ultimate “stress test.”

That description of Satan/*satán* has none of the qualities that we see in illustrations or in popular culture: There is no tail or horns or pitchforks. Most sources agree that this “classic” depiction was generated by influential preachers in the Middle Ages, who were intentionally trying to “scare Hell” out of (or into) the common people to get them to purchase **indulgences** from the pope: a kind of Value-Added Tax (VAT) on a believer’s faith and **salvation**. In addition, these indulgences could be purchased to help remove loved ones from hell or **purgatory**.

There is material here for any number of sermons, but we have a similar presentation of Satan, or the devil, in the classic short story, “**The Devil and Daniel Webster**,” by Stephen Vincent Benét, in which the devil, or satan, appears as a polite and **refined gentleman**. He appears because an unsuccessful New Hampshire farmer states that he would sell his soul for a reversal of his meager harvests. The devil appears as a stranger in human form, and negotiations begin. Finally, the farmer sells his soul and is rewarded with seven years of successful farming. The devil returns to collect, and an argument ensues. The farmer refuses to give up his soul. Finally, they agree to a trial that takes place in the fictional Crossroads, New Hampshire. The devil is the plaintiff and is described as “a soft-spoken, dark-dressed stranger.” The farmer hires the eloquent politician and orator, Daniel Webster, who wins the trial despite facing a “stacked jury.” The farmer keeps his soul. A fight breaks out, and Daniel Webster catches the devil, whom he calls Mr. Scratch, and delivers a swift kick to his rump. As a result, the devil **never appeared** in New Hampshire again.

Like the short story, our scripture depicts a character named the devil who seems powerful, but hardly appears to be the embodiment of evil. Instead, we have someone trying his best to influence Jesus to declare himself **fully human**. Because of this, we get a close look at the **divinity** of Jesus which is the purpose of the scripture selection. Of course, this concept of **Jesus** as a divine being, the **Son of God**, is one that we know pretty well, especially if we have been in church most of our lives.

But, on this **first Sunday in Lent** I see greater value for us in looking at another overarching **purpose** of our scripture lesson today: That is to convey to us a truly **human side to Jesus**. We sometimes have to stop and remind ourselves that **Jesus is fully human** while at the same time being **fully divine**. Of course, this is **nothing new** to the church. You may recall the words of the **Nicene Creed** which we will say together later in worship:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.

Notice that the wording **restates** the formula describing the **origin** of Jesus Christ at least **three times**, complete with references to the scriptures. It took the church leaders at the Council of Nicaea many months to argue through this language describing the **divinity and humanity** of

Jesus in this special way. They did remarkably well, since it is **foundational** to our **understanding** of Jesus Christ, and that understanding has endured for 1700 years.

So, how did we get to this part of the narrative about **Jesus of Nazareth**? Well, remember that Jesus was **baptized by John**, and God announced to everyone assembled there that **Jesus is God's Son**. God's Spirit **descended** on Jesus like a dove. You would think that this sequence of events would have convinced everyone present that this Jesus was the "real deal."

Moved by God's Spirit, Jesus retreats from the crowd and enters the wilderness. The time of forty days reflects the time of Moses before God in receiving the Ten Commandments (*Exodus* 34:27-28). Then, like the story of Daniel Webster and the devil, our **mystery guest** shows up. And, it happens pretty abruptly in all three versions in the Gospels.

So, we have this **opposing character** in a story that is very different from the other stories in the New Testament. On examination, this sequence of question-and-answer is similar to recorded discussions of the **rabbis** from this time. In their debates, the rabbis often assigned a fictional **opponent to God** and gave the opponent things to say in a discussion, or argument, with God. And, the Hebrew word for opponent or prosecutor, was used: *sa-tan* (Hebrew סתן).

So, if you were an educated Jew hearing this Gospel story in the audience in ancient Palestine, this appearance of an opponent would not seem unusual at all. With that background, we can look at these **two central figures** in a rather fantastic story in which Jesus is tested:

- Do you want **food**? Change the stones into food!
- Do you want to know the extent of your **personal power**? Invoke God's abilities given to you and save your human form from certain destruction!
- Do you want wealth and **security** on Earth? Add these earthly kingdoms to your management profile!

But, notice that Jesus is never "hooked" by these challenges. The responses all **point to God** and the greater **goal of salvation** for each one of us!

Instead, Jesus gets it "**right**." In contrast, you and I are pretty **frail**, far more likely to succumb to these temptations. In fact, we our actions and choices fall far short compared with the **life and ministry** of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we can certainly work toward **improving our responses** when difficulties arise. And, that kind of thing happens all the time: showing patience with a friend or loved one with failing short-term memory; overlooking the noisy children at the restaurant because, as bad as they seem, they are a blessing to their family even if you and I become a bit annoyed; and, at "tax time" trying to figure out our priorities for spending- and **giving**. Isn't it great that we have the entire season of **Lent** on our church calendar to look at ourselves in just **this light**?

And so, the real reason that this story is here at the **beginning of Lent**, is so that you and I can see **Jesus of Nazareth** raw and "unfiltered." He is both human and divine. **Jesus thirsts**. Jesus **gets hungry**. He has a human form and function. You and I easily **identify** with this. In these verses, Jesus is tested through his **human qualities**, but comes through because of his **divine nature**, unlike you and me.

Through this scripture lesson, we can **place ourselves** with Jesus in the wilderness. And, believe me, it is a **strange story** with supernatural happenings all through it. It is confusing and **enchanting** at the same time: a very well written story that **draws us in** and keeps our attention. We can **identify** with Jesus. After all, you and I get thirsty, and we get hungry. We look for **safety**

and nearly always make choices that **protect ourselves** instead of others. Most of the time, you and I are not looking with a **long view**, which is the exact trait and skill that we need for **effective ministry** and for a **deeper relationship** with God.

And, more portions of the story relate to us, as well. While we hardly consider ourselves **in a wilderness**, we are placed into a **culture** that does not agree with many of our beliefs and can even **ridicule us** when we act on those beliefs. Living in this way, you and I better understand the **Christ-centered love** that allows us to **serve others**. In this giving of ourselves, we come to **worship** and **join in prayer** and the **study of scripture**. Because of these commitments and **sharing**, we are looking out into the world in a **different way** that no longer centers on ourselves and our well-being; instead, we move continually in **our call from God**.

These are deep and **lasting changes** which come from deep within us. Through God's grace and love, you and I become **living witnesses** to the transforming power of Christ. And, this change is readily **seen by others**. And, over time **they are changed**, as well. With God and through Christ, we can learn **forbearance**: taking the longer view on issues such as **education, poverty, and child development**. We can **choose** to do the right thing, even when it creates difficulty, or even hardship, for us.

This Sunday, in our response to hearing God's Word, we will share in the **Eucharist**, the good gift of the Lord's supper which we receive from Christ as a **sacrament**. In its ancient liturgy, we are drawn **closer to God** and into the **presence of Christ**. It becomes a time of immersion in the true **mystery** of faith. And, as we leave today guided by **God's Spirit**, you and I are called to lead **a new life** built upon goodness and **love**, confronting life's temptations, and serving the **greater good** for **God's kingdom**.

Like Jesus in the wilderness, our **trust** is in God and in **God's Spirit** to lead us- **every step of the way!**

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