

What Does It Mean To Be Beloved?

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March 10 2019

Luke 4:1-13--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.

Lent is a great time for a perfectionist like me, at the beginning of my call with a great congregation like this, to settle into my humanity. To traverse this new wilderness into which the Spirit has led us together. Let me be clear: I am NOT saying that you all are the devil, tempting me, at least not yet. On the contrary, y'all have presented me with the image of God at work in this world, the embodiment of Jesus Christ, in all his wisdom and his struggles.

We pray TO Jesus and IN Jesus' name. We WORSHIP Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And today's gospel reading is proof that Jesus is HUMAN just like us! THAT is what makes the Lord we worship so special, so worth worshiping--He was not above experiencing life and death just as WE do. Temptations and all.

After being baptized, Jesus hears God call him "Beloved" as the Holy Spirit fills him. Then the same Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness, into the desert, into a place of desolation for a time of spiritual trial. Jesus, like the rest of humankind, has to "learn how to experience love in a bleak and lonely wasteland" (Thomas). He has to learn what it means to trust God, even in this place of desolation, even when he is famished and vulnerable, feeling insignificant and maybe even forgotten.

Just as evil and darkness lurk in the shadows, trying to lure us away from God, so the devil attempts to lure Jesus. In the reading of this story, an invitation is issued to all of us- to sit with

our hunger, to check our egos and be humble, to practice vulnerability. This Lent is a “time to stay and look evil in the face... to hear evil’s voice, recognize its allure, and confess its appeal... it is a time to decide who we are and whose we are” (Thomas) just as Jesus does in his own wilderness time.

First, we are invited to be human and hungry. I want to be clear- I am not talking only about physical hunger, but hunger that is felt deep within our SOULS. Hunger borne of a deep need that is not being met. The devil invites Jesus to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, but Jesus does not take the easy way out. He does not cheat his way to satisfaction. Instead he waits, pays attention to his hunger, and leans into God for its lasting fulfillment.

I mentioned being a perfectionist earlier... That perfectionism is borne of HUNGER in me. Hunger for love and approval. Hunger for what is good and just. Hunger I have known since I was a very little girl. This hunger is something I have had to learn to sit with, to allow it to teach me. It is so tempting to cheat my way out of the discomfort, allowing my perfectionism to take over, to work some sort of magic that will restore order in times of chaos or peace in times of shame. But when I resist that urge, when I sit in my hunger in these times of chaos and shame, I learn to trust God’s nourishment. It may not be nourishment by food I would choose for myself, but it will feed me, nevertheless.

Next we are invited to be human and insignificant. After showing Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world,” (Luke 4:5b) the devil tempts Jesus to worship him, and therefore gain power over them. Glory. Authority. Clout. God’s children have a tenuous relationship with power. The uncomfortable truth is that AUTHENTIC Christian power **resides in weakness**. But we have a hard time with that weakness. We have a hard time trusting that God sees us, even when the powers-that-be do not. Jesus’ second temptation is an invitation to allow our lives as God’s children to thrive in quiet places, humble places.

Walking into this pastoral relationship I have been reminded of this. Many of you may know what goes on behind the scenes, but others may not. These first couple weeks have been a bit difficult in a beautiful way, because there are so many different people working together... each doing their own job, each just one piece of the puzzle. You do not ask for glory or recognition. You work tirelessly for your families, whatever those families may look like. You work full time (or more) to make ends meet financially or you volunteer with organizations who need your energy. And whatever other time you have, you spend humbly serving your church, our church--balancing the checkbook or counting money, or giving rides to those who are unable to drive. Making sure the computers and phones work, or preparing Sunday School and Bible Study lessons. Or making meals for events, or making and taking meals to people who need them. And I know you are tired. I know you have been holding the pieces together the best you can... for a long time. I know it feels like the strings holding those pieces together have become threadbare and worn. You are living into authentic Christian power. You are beloved, and God sees you in your weakness, your tiredness, and your need.

The final invitation is to be human and vulnerable. This may be one of the most difficult. We want to believe that if God loves us, God will keep us safe from all harm. But when we are honest with ourselves, we know the truth is this: just as WE cannot protect our loved ones from all the harm that may come to them, God's love is not for us "an impenetrable shield. We are human beings living in a broken, dangerous world."

Jesus will die on the cross. And "God's precious children [will] still bleed, still ache, still die" (Thomas). We, as those precious children are loved IN our vulnerability, not OUT of it. Perhaps no one knows this better than the loved ones of people experiencing addiction, such a painful disease that requires our vulnerability through times of helplessness and worry... Anger and deep grief.

Wilderness happens, and God can redeem even the most barren places of our lives, if we choose to remain and pay attention. "Lent is not a time to do penance for being human." Instead, we are invited to allow this to be a "time to embrace all that it means to BE human" (Thomas). We are invited to stay and look evil in the face... to hear evil's voice, recognize its allure, and confess its appeal... a time to decide who we are and whose we are- human and hungry, human and vulnerable, human and beloved. Amen.

Work Cited

Thomas, Debie. "Human and Hungry." *Journey with Jesus*, posted 03 March 2019.
www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2112