

First Sunday in Lent
February 14, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Larson
Luke 4:1-13

[Click to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

My daughter Abby has been learning about persuasive speech in second grade. The other day she heard someone talk about Burger King and she said, “oh yeah mom, I heard a persuasive speech about Burger King on the radio.”

- It took me awhile to figure out when she’d heard that - was I listening to a story on public radio about fast food restaurants?
- Then she described this persuasive speech and I realized she’d heard a radio commercial for Burger King.

Oh, right - commercials and ads are definitely a kind of persuasive speech.

- I tend to forget that because we’re so surrounded by advertisements and marketing.
- They seem like just more of the noise of this information age.

In many ways, the persuasive speech used by marketers is similar to what the devil tries on Jesus in the wilderness. Now, I’m not saying advertisers are the devil - two of my favorite aunts work in marketing. Rather, I’m saying the devil used very effective persuasive techniques - techniques that marketers are on to as well. So even though we may not have a little man with red horns telling us to turn stones into bread, and actually Jesus probably didn’t see a little man either, we do face many of the same kinds of temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness.

Some context about the whole idea of the devil might be helpful here.

- Jews in Jesus’ time developed a belief in the devil as the source of evil from their contact with people of other faith traditions, especially the Zoroastrians, for whom the powers of good and of evil were in perpetual conflict.
- But for Jews and Christians, evil is never an equal power to God.
- The devil here and throughout scripture is a power much lesser than God that seeks to lure us away from God.

So what was this tempter up to into the wilderness and what insight can this story give us into our struggles? First of all, there’s a translation issue. The devil’s taunts to Jesus should be translated “**since** you are the Son of God” rather than “**if** you are the Son of God.” It seems the devil is saying to Jesus, since you are the Son of God:

- You shouldn’t be hungry. You should just turn stones into bread; come on, you deserve it. It’s been a rough stretch and you really should just kick back, have a nice meal.

- Since you're the Son of God, you should have all the power in the world; you should be able to do whatever you want and trust that God's got your back.
- Go ahead, you deserve it.

How many times a day are we told we really deserve some luxury, that we should prioritize our own wants? Jesus rejects this kind of entitled thinking as it leads us away from the God who provides for the needs of all people.

On another level, the devil appeals to Jesus' pride. Since you're God's Son:

- You should be able to make bread appear in the wilderness just like Moses was able to get bread from heaven when the Israelites were in the desert.
- You should be able to rule the nations of the world because you'd certainly rule better than they would. You could rule with justice.
- You should be able to be invincible; come on, try.

Jesus rejects the kind of speech that appeals to our egos, that tries to puff us up - speech we're surrounded by constantly.

And on the deepest level, the devil tries to convince Jesus that he isn't enough, that he needs something more in order to be OK.

- The devil tries to convince Jesus that what he's been given, his identity as God's Beloved Son, is not sufficient and he needs to take matters into his own hands.
- The devil seeks to get Jesus to think he doesn't measure up as God's son unless he can perform, unless he has more power, unless he's invincible.

We get these messages all the time. In so many ways, marketing tells us that we don't have enough, that we are not enough, and that we won't be OK unless our performance is enhanced - unless we get something more or do something else.

As we think about the devil's persuasions and our own struggles with these messages, it's helpful to notice that the particular things the devil tempts Jesus to do aren't bad things.

- Jesus is hungry. What could be wrong with a miracle that makes bread? Later he'll provide bread for thousands.
- The kingdoms of the world that the devil shows Jesus are led by corrupt leaders. What could be wrong with claiming power and bringing in God's reign of justice and peace? Jesus' whole ministry is focused on that.
- And, on the cross Jesus says, "into your hands I commend my spirit". So, what could be wrong with trusting himself in God's hands now?

The problem here is that the devil is trying to get Jesus to forget his larger mission by tempting him to look out for number one, build himself up and prove himself. When Jesus does do things that are similar to what the devil suggests here, Jesus does them for the sake of others and not to establish his own comfort or power.

So what helps Jesus resist the devil? What can help us in our struggles with similar issues, especially as we're barraged by so much persuasive speech? For one thing, Jesus is secure in his identity. He trusts the promises given to him in baptism that he is God's Beloved Son. In baptism we also are claimed as God's beloved children. We are enough, our identity is secure, we don't need to try to prove ourselves. Each week as we gather for worship we're reminded of this identity so that we can face all the forces that try to convince us that we're not OK.

Jesus also has the gift of the Holy Spirit with him as he faces these trials. This story begins by telling us that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit leads him in the wilderness. So he's not alone out there. And neither are we. The Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism is given to us in baptism as well. We are marked with the sign of the cross and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

In the wilderness Jesus also has the gift of scripture to draw upon. The devil tries to use scripture to lead Jesus away from God yet Jesus is more deeply grounded in the whole story of Scripture. Jesus knows the stories of his people, the people of Israel. He knows they point to a God we can and need to trust - to a God who seeks the well-being of all rather than the privileged few.

This is our story as well. We gather each week to hear that story, to be reminded that we have a good and trustworthy God and that we have a place in God's story of the healing of all creation. We each have a larger purpose, beyond our wants, beyond our ego.

Of course, Jesus also has something else going for him in the wilderness - he is fully divine; we not so much. We will fail. We will be led astray by all the voices seeking to persuade us that we're not enough, that we must take matters into our own hands, that we should look out for number one. We will forget our larger purpose in order to secure our own comfort.

So thankfully, we're also given the gift of forgiveness. And we're given the gift of prayer - prayer that helped Jesus connect to the Spirit. We're even given a particular prayer from Jesus that helps us to pray for God to "forgive us our sins, save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil." We have all that we need to face the trials and struggles of our lives, trusting God and taking our part in God's story. Let's rest in that assurance for a few moments.

Please rise and join in our hymn #319 – *O Lord, throughout These Forty Days.*