

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 9, 2014
First Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 2:4-3:7
Psalm 51:1-13
Romans 5:12-21
Matthew 4:1-11

As we enter the season of Lent with Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, it is important to remember the event that immediately precedes this in Matthew's Gospel.

In both Matthew and Luke, the event that comes immediately before this is the baptism of Jesus. The event where the Spirit descends and the voice says, "this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Following that is the account we read today of Jesus out in the wilderness, a wilderness which he encounters not because of the cares of this life, or because of dumb luck, but because he is led there by the Spirit of God.

And so, in the span of a few short verses, a seismic shift has occurred. Jesus has gone from the banks of the Jordan River to the middle of nowhere. He has gone from baptized and blessed to famished and hungry. He has gone from "this is my beloved Son," to "if you are the Son of God..." He has gone from "you are," to "*if* you are..."

He has spent forty days and nights in the middle of nowhere, and he is no doubt famished. Matthew probably understates it when he says, “he became very hungry.”

Jesus is alone and utterly depleted. All that remains to him is the Word of God. All that he has left is the promise that was just given to him in his baptism that he is *somebody*, that he is God’s Beloved. All Jesus has left is the promise of *who* he is: *you are my beloved Son*.

But when you are in the middle of nowhere and you haven’t eaten for forty days, it can be hard to remember what happened in the Jordan River. And if it wasn’t hard enough, the Tempter seizes the opportunity to make it even more difficult. He comes to Jesus and he says, “if you are the Son of God, *prove* it.”

“If you are the Son of God,” says the enemy, “prove yourself and turn these stones into bread.”

“If you are the Son of God, prove yourself and cast yourself down from the Temple.”

Do you see what the Devil is doing here? He is tempting Jesus to doubt *who God says he is*. He is tempting Jesus to doubt what has just been spoken to him in his baptism. “You are” is now being challenged with “*if you are...*”

The enemy’s tactic is masterful. He is tempting Jesus to believe that being God’ beloved is something he has to *prove*, rather than something he already *is*.

He is challenging Jesus to prove himself, to base his confidence on *what he does* rather than on *who he is*.

What a masterful strategy. For if Jesus becomes uncertain or insecure about *who he is*, then the pressure to force God's hand to provide for him and to protect him becomes immense.

In that sense Jesus may have been no different than you and me. When we are insecure about who we are, we often feel the most pressure to "prove ourselves" do we not?

The waters of baptism are wonderful, but the fact is that we don't stay there for very long. The promise made to us in our baptism that we are God's beloved is wonderful, but eventually the road we travel also leads to the wilderness. And in the wilderness we cannot see the banks of the Jordan any longer. And so we wonder:

Am I who I thought I was?

Am I who God says I am?

Does God really love me?

Is God really in control?

This is when the enemy comes to us with the same challenge he offered to Jesus: the challenge to forget *who we are*. He tempts us to think that being beloved is something we must *prove* rather than something that we simply *are*. He

wants us to be so insecure about being God's beloved that we live our lives constantly trying to prove ourselves worthy of that love. In a word, he tempts us to think that God's love for us is *conditional*.

This was the enemy's approach with Jesus. Isolate him, get him alone when he is weak, and move in with full strength.

But the Holy Spirit strengthened Jesus to affirm his true identity. The Spirit enabled him to remember that he was the same person in the wilderness that he was at the Jordan River.

And it should not be lost on us the context in which this occurs. Jesus has been fasting for forty days. We would assume that going without food for forty days would make Jesus weak and vulnerable. But ironically, the very opposite happened. His sustained spiritual discipline gave him a "holy focus," that can only be known by *practicing* such a discipline rather than talking about it.

One writer puts it like this:

The point of [Jesus'] fast was not to be weakened such that a temptation would result, but to be sustained in body, mind, and spirit for a holy calling, to be so filled that there is no room for anyone else except the One who calls you back into the world. The tempter then becomes an interruption, not an actor in this drama. Hunger sustained for and by the Holy Spirit strengthens the human spirit to accomplish more than is humanly conceivable. [Lisa M. Hess, *Lectionary Homiletics* 19:2, p. 16]

Jesus was strengthened by the Spirit to remember who he was, and to remind him that he had nothing to prove. But isn't it interesting that it was a spiritual discipline that was integral to that strength? Something as out of vogue and dull as fasting?

I have no doubt that if the Spirit could strengthen Jesus to help him affirm his true identity, the Spirit can also strengthen us and help us understand that God's love for us is unconditional, that we are who God says we are at our baptism.

And would it not be possible, then, that spiritual disciplines such as we think of during Lent, could be a *means* toward helping us remember who we are, and *Whose* we are? Such disciplines do not help us earn God's love, nor do they prove us worthy of God's love. *But they can sensitize us and make us more receptive to God's love.*

When that happens, we also are sustained in body, mind, and spirit, for our holy calling to be the presence of Christ to a hurting world. After all, there are countless ones out there who have wandered far from home and forgotten who they are. Maybe -- just maybe -- *we* could remind them...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.