

**Is this *REALLY* about
Temptation? Luke 4, Lent 1C**

Slide – Wilderness

One Wednesday in Lent at Pacific Lutheran Seminary where I was a student (seemingly long ago now), a group of us were standing in the cafeteria line looking to see what the soup was for the soup supper that day. To help reduce the usual taking of too much food, one of the staff from the cafeteria put a sign next to a big bowl of apples that read: “Take only one apple. God is watching.”

I was friends with a prankster, who decided grab a piece of paper and pen and ran to the plates of cookies in the dessert section. There, he wrote a sign of his own that said: “Take as many cookies as you want. God is watching the apples.”

I was reminded about that story when reading Luke’s version of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. And yet, is temptation really

what this story is about? Why is it in the Gospels? What is its purpose? What are we supposed to learn about who Jesus is and who God is? Surely this is more than about resisting a piece of chocolate or resisting the temptation to do something.

I think there are two questions that really face Jesus here in this Gospel for today. And, they are two questions also for us to ponder for our own lives, too. The first is, “what do you want in life?” And, the second is connected to the first: “what kind of person will that make you”? Put another way like you would ask a child, “what do you want to be when you grow up”?

At the start of today’s Gospel, we hear that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where for 40 days he is tempted by the devil. The Greek word devil means “slanderer”. So, The Slanderer is walking alongside him while Jesus gets more and more hungry and alone. What does a slanderer do? Well, they

often walk with you acting as a friend, a well-wisher. They often don't tell outright lies but take the truth and try to massage it in such a way that it seems good to be or do this way. The worst thing about a slanderer, a devil, is they try to convince you to be something you either are not or that you do not wish to be. They convince you to be something you are not meant to be.

Jesus has just come from his baptism where the very same Spirit of God proclaims him as God's very own Son, and this is a Son for whom God is well pleased. This is the identity God proclaims Jesus is to be, but this is the first time Jesus hears it out loud himself, even as he likely knows deep down that he is becoming this. Coming out from the waters, Jesus has some decision making to do. He has to decide what being God's only Son means. What will he want to do with that AND what kind of person does he want to be?

But, here's the thing. The Slanderer also knows who Jesus is and this sneaky

creature that seems to feign being a friend also knows the Bible really well, too, enough to be wily. This is one who definitely wants to take advantage of the fact that Jesus is honing in on his identity, his HUMAN identity but also his DIVINE identity, that Jesus has immense divine power, and this Slanderer will do everything he can to turn Jesus away from that identity, not to mention that power.

We know this is the case because of one little phrase used by this fiend who would fake to be the friend of Jesus: "If you are the Son of God!" This little phrase in English is not quite the same as in the Greek, which many Greek scholars say is more like: "If you are the Son of God...and we both KNOW that you ARE!"

So, the Slanderer knows who Jesus is. Here is kind of my own paraphrase: "Hey, Jesus, if you are the Son of God and we both KNOW that you ARE - you know you are really special as God just said at that baptism thing you did. Why do you bother being weak by

putting on human clothes, flesh and bone? You don't have to and you're hungry. No one will see you turn this rock into bread; Just a suggestion."

But, then Jesus discerns the questions of identity: "what do I want in life and what kind of person will that make me"? Jesus decides that his identity as God's Son is more important than personal comfort and reminds us of scripture – One cannot live by only bread. First identity crisis averted.

So the Slanderer, who has had 40 days to try again, tries a different tack by addressing Jesus' power by showing him all the Kingdoms of the world. Again, my own paraphrase and take on the conversation: "Wouldn't it be great if you had power over all those horrible Kingdoms, of oligarchs and corrupt power mongers? You could easily confiscate THEIR yachts no problem and stop them from invading countries! You'd keep the peace! Look, Jesus, you could change everything and I could help you get that

authority to do it. Just worship me – a tiny thing - and we could rule the galaxy together!"

But, Jesus again checks in with himself and discerns his identity: "what do I want in life and what kind of person will that make me"? What does it mean to be God's Son for the life he is here to share? Again, Jesus shows us who he is called to be by showing us that God has bigger plans than just what we long to see or want to happen. Jesus sees the long game and quotes scripture again, reminding us and the tempter of who really is the true God: "Worship only God," Jesus says.

Lastly, the Slanderer takes Jesus to the top of the temple showing him all of Jerusalem below them. "If you are the Son of God – and we BOTH know that you ARE, prove it to them. Are you really, really sure that you are God's son as it was said at the baptism? If so, God will protect you when you fall as scripture says God will not let

your foot even be harmed against a stone.”

Again, this is my paraphrase. But, Jesus, after 40 days knows his identity. Famished, exhausted, and tempted, Jesus shows us that he has answered the questions: “what do I want in life and what kind of person will that make me”?

Jesus chooses to be what God calls him to be, which will lead him to a cross. And, he doesn't take the easy way out, he maintains his authenticity and continues to be the Human One despite his divinity. He now knows he is ready for his ministry, to call the disciples, to teach, heal, suffer, and die. This story shows us that Jesus accepts the identity of who he is instead of the identity the world would make of him.

What about you? “What do you want in life and what kind of person will that make you?” Where is your wilderness, what are you famished for, what do you want to control, what

protection are you thinking you should have and what will that make you become as a person?

It isn't just Jesus who has the Slanderer at his side. We have plenty of company with us, too. We might think that this story only has to do with Jesus, that his Divine power is what got him through this, but we can learn about this temptation story that may not be just about temptation. We can learn about it for us and apply it to our lives, too. Identity, purpose, meaning, all those things matter for whether or not this world will heal.

For like Jesus, we are also called from our baptism to be people formed from the love of God. How we discern and respond to that love is everything. We, all of us are beloved at the waters of baptism, not only Jesus, all of us, including today Sophia, Nora, & Aria, baptized into Christ and the Church Universal. We are sent into the wilderness and there, we determine what we want in

life and what kind of person that will make us. Our choice is whether we are formed from God's intentions for us or if we go our own way along with the Slanderers of this world.

even at times of testing and temptation. Amen.

Sure, Jesus had some better help for himself, given that he was fully Divine and fully Human, but that divinity, that Spirit of God, a spark of that Spirit is also within all the baptized as promised. Christ's Spirit is within you, a piece of Christ promised at the Pentecost. We are not perfect as Christ, but with the Spirit's help, we can discern as Christ did from baptism to the wilderness and out again.

And, we are not alone in our discerning our identity. The people of Israel were not alone as they wandered the wilderness. They had manna and quail and we have bread and wine, precious gifts to guide us and sustain us in our discernment along the Wilderness Road. Christ's very own bread given for us, shed for us, enough to help us