

A Time of Returning: “Facing the Soul”

Luke 4: 1-14

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’”

⁹Then the devil took Jesus 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, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘God will command the 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.’” ¹¹Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹²When 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.

Watch Johnnie Cash’s video, “Hurt,” and you feel something real. Maybe it’s because when he shot the video, he refused to wear makeup; he didn’t want to look younger. Maybe it’s because, within his trembling voice you can hear the fragility of his life nearing its end. Or maybe it’s because he lets us in on a confession where all the golden records, and personas, and crowds chanting his name—all of it goes away in the end. It’s a song where he seems face-to-face with his soul asking, “Who am I, really?” Jesus is still dripping wet from his baptism when the Spirit immediately leads him into the wilderness where Jesus is face-to-face with his soul. And where he must wrestle with the same question: “Who am I, really?”

The wilderness question is a question for all of us: Who are we? We can ask as a society, as a church, or as individuals. Over the past two years most of us have been dragged through the sand. Covid has put us on the ropes. Our structures have been forced to look at who they really are as teachers and medical workers join the great resignation. In the church, as volunteers and resources become limited, and as families with children no longer seem to be interested, we are forced to ask the question: Who are we now? And as individuals we have had an honest look at life and asked ourselves what really matters. In the wilderness, things get real. It cuts through the minutia of our lives and makes us look at who we really are.

So notice, Jesus is wandering the desert for a while. And at his most vulnerable moment, the Tempter shows up with three propositions. “If you’re famished, you can turn the stone into bread. Surely, God does not want you to starve. You can provide for your needs and perhaps you can even help all those hungry people out there.” It’s quite the offer. Imagine, no more one

out of four children starving in Winston Salem. All Jesus had to do was say yes, and give in. But it isn't who he is. Next, comes the question of power and control. "Are you going to use your power to save the people?" Imagine Jesus as president: no more racism; no more legislating people's lives; no more endless war. All Jesus needed to do was seal the deal. But it isn't who he is. Then finally, the Tempter gets personal: "If you really are God's beloved child, then God will protect you." What if God's love could protect families in Ukraine, or a school or a synagogue when an active shooter arrives. It's perhaps the greatest temptation which is why Luke's gospel makes this one the climax. It's the temptation to believe that if God really chooses us, really loves us, then we will be safe and protected from our pain. All Jesus had to do was say yes. But it isn't who he is.

But hold on a minute! Before we go making Jesus superhuman, we have to notice that as we read ahead in the story Jesus does do all three of these things. He does feed the hungry with bread. Except, he empowers his disciples when he says, "You feed them." He does inaugurate the kingdom of God. Except, the kingdom is about a different kind of power which liberates and centers the poor. Jesus does ask God to somehow protect him as he awaits his arrest in the garden: "If this cup could pass over me... please let it." You see, Jesus does all the things he is asked to do by the Tempter. So what is the temptation? I wonder if the temptation is for Jesus to do these things for us instead of with us. To feed us rather than to empower us to feed one another. To rule the earth with fortitude rather than forgiveness. To give us the thought that our chosenness will protect us from suffering rather than call us into it. You see, by saying no to the Tempter, Jesus is saying yes to us.

So back to the question, who are we, really? After all, we are all susceptible to the next best thing we think will fulfill our lives. We are all seduced by a power which can take hold of empire and economy. And we all desire to avoid hardships. Yet, Jesus says, "We cannot live by bread alone, but by God's word." And what was the last word God spoke to Jesus? "You are my beloved child, in whom I delight!" Jesus isn't immune to wanting to avoid suffering, or find quick fix solutions, or be compelled by a power which can offer survival and security. There is no cure to being human. But he clings to his identity as God's beloved child as if it is the only lifeline he has. Because it is...for all of us.

So during Lent, how are we going to create space to practice leaning on our belovedness? There is a church that during their worship service invites congregants to confess something going on in their lives. Like an AA meeting, each week one person gets real about a regret, or a struggle, or a doubt they had about faith. After they share, the church reminds them they are a beloved child of God, no matter what. The pastor thought it was a bit risky and wouldn't last very long. But when she put up a sign-up sheet, to her surprise it filled up. Next month, full. Now the times are full a year in advance. Turns out, people needed an affirming space to be face-to-face with their souls and talk about what is real and be reminded of who they are. If that's too bold, maybe we can make time to repeat the mantra in prayer: "I am God's beloved child, and that is enough." Maybe we take out a journal and commit to scribbling down what is real each morning over coffee.

Or perhaps we give the confession thing a try. With the understanding that no matter what is confessed, we are going to affirm one another's belovedness. Because that is who we really are. And whatever wilderness we going through, we cling to the hope together that it is enough, even when life puts it all to the test. Amen.