

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 9, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Deuteronomy 8:1-6; 2nd Reading: Romans 10:8b-13

Scripture for Message: Luke 4:1-13 “Refuge & Strength”

This is a familiar story included in the Gospels, except not in the Gospel of John. We read these scriptures mostly at the beginning of Lent because Lent for us illustrates the forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness, minus Sundays. Frequently we read these verses as the means to encourage followers of Christ to resist the temptations that come upon them during the season of Lent, our faith encourages us to “sacrifice” something as Jesus sacrificed in the wilderness. But let’s not make this about us, let’s look at these scriptures for a “word” about God.

In Luke’s gospel these scenes unfold just after Jesus’ baptism, remember that at his baptism the Spirit descended upon him “like a dove.” So now, Jesus, filled with the Spirit, is led by the Spirit in the wilderness. How we read this verse can affect the way we look at its meaning. Luke writes that the Spirit led Jesus which to me indicates the Spirit did not drive Jesus into the wilderness nor force Jesus to wander – Jesus willingly followed the Spirit’s guidance into the wilderness. These words also suggest to me that the Spirit was with Jesus in the wilderness, guiding and leading him through that difficult period. Jesus chose to follow the Spirit, and the Spirit did not leave him or abandon him during that time.

Jesus makes the choice to stand firm in the face of those temptations, which says something about his character. I think it is important to note the nature of the devil’s attempts to “tempt” Jesus. Notice that the devil specifically directed the temptations to Jesus, and he tied them to Jesus’ sense of self and identity. The first temptation addressed Jesus’ hunger and challenged him to prove his identity as the Son of God by commanding a stone to become a loaf of bread. The third temptation too challenged his identity, “If you are the Son of God,” but Jesus disregarded the devil’s “ifs.” Jesus decides what it means to be Jesus.

The temptations of the devil challenged Jesus to grasp worldly powers – economic in the “creation” of bread, political power in all the kingdoms of the world, and mystical power on the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus said no to all this choosing instead what the world would consider weakness. Jesus chooses the word of God for sustenance and refuses to become the ruler of *any* nation. He also says no to the offer of proving God’s protection by throwing himself off a building. I am sure that those who heard Luke’s words saw that Jesus’ responses proved his knowledge of scripture as well as his knowledge of self. Luke depicts Jesus as both teacher of the law and observant and obedient practitioner of Jewish laws and traditions.

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But what if Jesus had said yes to these temptations, would that change the way his future unfolded? I think it would illustrate a hesitancy to rely fully on God and that would interfere with how Jesus' ministry proceeded. Would Jesus have been able to cure illness, drive out demons, and raise the dead? Would we still be telling stories two thousand years later about the Son of God if he had given into those temptations? That's a lot of hypotheticals to consider and thankfully we don't have to consider them because Jesus was faithful and obedient.

So, what does this tell us about Jesus' nature. We can tell ourselves that Jesus' responses mean a rejection of traditional power, but Jesus at times in his ministry did exercise power in a traditional way. Think about the time he overturned the tables in the temple. He could have done all that the devil tempted him with, he was the Son of God. Jesus simply chose not to give in. Jesus refused to define his ministry with the kind of power humanity tends to idolize and that is what probably compelled the religious and government authorities to despise him. Matt Fitzgerald tells us that "By refusing to practice human power, Jesus made himself vulnerable to human power."¹ This was Jesus' conscious choice to turn away from power and toward passivity, to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit and God his father and choose obedience and service.

One other thing I think we should note is that the temptations challenged Jesus' sense of self but not his sense of the other. The devil tempted divine power, but not divine love. Jesus was secure in his relationship with God the father, Jesus was certain of the love that he shared within the relationship of the trinity. The temptations did not challenge Jesus to choose between himself and others – I wonder how that would have turned out. The devil did not say, "Worship me or I will destroy all of Israel." Hmm, I wonder if that made Jesus' choices easier.

So, what does this tell us about God? Matt Fitzgerald also tells us that this is a lesson for us that "God cannot be boxed into our presuppositions about strength or limited by our understandings of weakness."² Was weakness exhibited as Jesus refused to give in to those temptations? Some will think not, but surely Jesus chose weakness rather than to grasp power. This section of Luke's gospel recalls the Old Testament stories of Israel's wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Through all of that wandering we read of God's presence with them, of God's provisions of food and safety. What we read from Deuteronomy this morning recalls God's protection during those years. The difference being that the people of Israel did not stand fast when tempted, they cried for bread when

¹ Matt Fitzgerald. "Luke 4:1-13 / Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke Vol 1*. eds. Jarvis & Johnson. WJK. 2014. Print. 95-97.

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there was none, they constructed a Golden Calf rather than worship a God they could not see, they continually took foolish risks and then cried to God for rescue. Luke represents Jesus as succeeding where Israel failed – a contrast for us to keep in mind.

Jesus experienced God's love and protection in the wilderness, he enjoyed the presence of the Holy Spirit and Angels attended to his needs. Just as God protected and loved the people of Israel. This scripture is not telling us how to fight the devil's temptations but how a relationship with God gives us strength and provides for us a safe refuge and shelter. The message is that God provides, God answers when we call, God rescues and saves. In Deuteronomy we can read Moses telling the people "Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him." And Paul writes to the Romans, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame . . . for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In this scripture we see that God works in the wilderness, God works through the guidance of the Spirit – even when following the Spirit puts us in potential peril. I mean, Luke tells us that the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness where the devil was waiting for him. But what did the devil really want? There was no indication that Jesus was in any physical harm, the devil mostly wanted Jesus to give him all the attention. The devil wanted Jesus to turn away from his divine inheritance and worship him. The thing about temptations is that they can appear reasonable and innocuous. What's the harm? Just turn this stone into bread so you can eat. Temptations however will steal our identity as children of God. Temptations challenge our willingness to rely on God and our conviction to follow the way of Jesus – that is where the harm comes. Maybe not physical harm but certainly harm to our eternal soul.

Wandering in the wilderness was not inherently harmful by itself. Throughout the Gospel stories of Jesus, we see him withdrawing to the wilderness to pray in solitude. The wilderness for Jesus becomes an escape for rejuvenation and assurance of God's provisions. The wilderness moments for Jesus affirms his reliance on God's strength and power rather than any human power. During this season of Lent, following Christ means a calling to willingly enter the wilderness with the Spirit as our guide. During this time many Christians allow their faith to "work" on them bringing them to another level of Christian maturity. The focus in Lent for many Christians is to remember God's provision, protection, and sanctuary for others and us. Some of us choose to deny ourselves certain luxuries as we embark on journeys of self-exploration and awareness.

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Jesus refused to rule over an earthly kingdom and indicates to us that no political leader can be our Messiah no matter how much we idolize them. Jesus also chose not to tempt God even though he knew that God would rescue – how often do we put ourselves in tricky situations which can be financial, physical, or imagined and then call out to God to rescue us. Jesus shows the strength of a true leader by choosing servanthood, by choosing a position that some might consider weakness and choosing to stand against temptations. Jesus refused to pay any attention to the devil’s attempt to steal his identity.

Lessons for us in this scripture reading may not be what you are expecting – Jesus refused economic power and instead chose the word of God for his nourishment. When we, as a church, choose to feed the hungry are we also offering them a word of friendship or spiritual encouragement – or are we merely attending to physical needs and neglecting their souls? The message for the church is that we must stand firm in the face of the world’s attempts to change our identity. I believe that means choosing a position that our culture might perceive as weakness. Choosing to be free from the fetters of society’s expectations for how we conduct our worship or how many people sit in our pews.

The church must continue to operate with integrity choosing to do God’s will rather than the will of “the people.” It takes strength to turn the other cheek and welcome those that our culture would choose to turn away. It takes strength to speak truth to power and it takes strength to stand for beliefs that others might consider submissive. It takes strength to stand up when the world around you is bending the knee to false gods and false religions. Remember, the mission of this church is to honor God, share the love of Christ, and change lives ministering grace AND PEACE. Today is the first Sunday of our Lenten journey – let us remember who we are following.