

March 10, 2019  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Luke 4: 1-13  
“The Tempter Within”



I haven't experienced it in Nebraska, but I know that in some regions of the country, it is not uncommon to be asked point blank to your face, "Are you saved?" The question can pop up anywhere at any time with no warning. You could be watching your kids play soccer when another soccer mom turns to you, "are you saved?" You could be walking through an airport when approached with the question, "are you saved?" You could be crossing a downtown street, "hello, nice day, are you saved?" In a store, at the park, at a show, anyone can pop the question. What's that mean?

Some of our Christian brothers and sisters use the term 'salvation' to reference a fire escape from a burning lake of eternity. For some, To be saved is to escape being LEFT BEHIND if all Christians are vaporized from the earth. In that context, 'salvation' is all about life after death. For many Christians, the focus of faith is mostly about getting to heaven and avoiding an alternative.

It is interesting that getting to heaven dominates some Christian faith since getting to heaven wasn't a point of concern for our religious ancestors. The first "explicit unambiguous reference" to life after death does not come in Hebrew scripture until about a century and a half before Jesus. That means that all through the Old Testament, for thousands of years, from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through Kings David and Solomon on through the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah and the others, the people of ancient Israel seemed to have no belief or focus on life after death. "For most of the biblical period, Israel's life with God was not motivated by hope of an afterlife, yet they spoke and wrote about salvation" <sup>1</sup> often. They preached the importance of taking the One Holy God seriously. They referenced 'Lord of Salvation', 'horn of salvation', 'God of salvation' throughout their writings. But if they weren't practicing faith in order to 'get to heaven', what is this 'salvation' found in the roots of our faith tradition?

The primary biblical understanding of salvation is not about another world. It's about this world. <sup>2</sup> Salvation comes from same root as 'salve', a healing ointment. Salvation has to do with healing the wounds of existence of this very present world. Over the next weeks of Lent, we will look at some biblical images of salvation. Are we saved and saving what Jesus taught?

The scripture we heard read is the traditional reading that starts our season of Lent. Jesus is in the wilderness. Just before this scene, Jesus was baptized. We are told that after he was baptized, he was praying when he heard the words, "you are my Son, the beloved..." Jesus has been given identity in baptism, "you are my son, beloved." Jesus is full of God's Spirit, and he goes into the wilderness for forty days where he fasts and prays where he wrestles with what it means to be a beloved son of God. In the wilderness, he must decide what this identity means.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg. *The God We Never Knew*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997. P. 157

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

This scene presents a confrontation between Jesus and the Tempter. I say “the Tempter,” or “The Adversary” not “Satan” or “The Devil,” because when we hear words like Satan or the Devil we think in terms of how modern culture has personified the little red-tailed, pointy eared, pitch fork dude on the hot sauce bottle. In Hebrew teachings, the HaSatan was not a cartoon character or the fire breathing ruler of Hell. The Tempter, or the Adversary was the voice who took the opposite side, who challenged an opposing view to that which was thought to be the view of God.

In Luke the Tempter plays “Let’s Make a Deal” with Jesus.  
If you are the Son of God,... turn stones into bread....

Jesus is tempted to turn stones into food. He’s been without food for forty days. He’s hungry. He deserves to eat. It’s not like he’s tempted to do something illegal or evil. There’s nothing sinful with bread (unless you count carbs). So, why not conjure up some manna? What are the gospel author’s trying to say here? Luke is making statements about Jesus. Before Luke ever begins telling the stories of Jesus, he is going to show his readers what Jesus is NOT. Jesus is not one who will exploit God’s gift – his identity in God for his own benefit. The gifts of the Spirit are not about serving one’s own needs. Luke shows right up front, Jesus’ ministry is not about his own satisfaction or personal salvation.

The Tempter’s voice says, If you are the Son of God... jump off the roof of the temple....Next Jesus is tempted to challenge current political power for personal glory. The temptation to gain power by compromising one’s identity is very real. Again, the Tempter’s voice offers, If you are the Son of God...I’ll give you all the world to worship me.”

This passage is an interesting sparring match. Notice that both sides use scripture to proof text their arguments.

Luke shows that however tempting it might have been, this story that will follow is about one whose identity is NOT in self-gratifying, self-serving, self-worship. Jesus wrestled with The Temptation to see Salvation as only a SELF gift. The Tempter promises food security to a famished man, prosperity to those who fear starvation. The Tempter promises safety and protection, even from daredevil risks like steeple jumping. The Tempter promises power and fame and all the accolades of the earth if Jesus will trade in his identity as Son of God. The Tempters promise for us is not to fall but to rise. This Tempter isn’t some pointed eared red faced flame throwing Devil that any one of us would have the sense to run away from. The Tempter doesn’t approach us to offer personal, social and professional ruin. The Tempter doesn’t say, “Come with me and I’ll ruin your life, destroy your career, steel your self-respect and cost you your family.” The Tempter promises prosperity, protection and power. The Tempter offers to meet our needs. The Tempter offers to conquer our fears and inadequacies.

The Tempter knows just where to hook each one of us because the Tempter knows us so well. It’s almost like the Tempter is in our heads, reading our mind, overhearing our thoughts. Satan is not in a fiery pit of hell or a galaxy far, far away, but as near as the breath of our being. The Tempter is our own voice of inadequacy. Our own voice of shame and unworthiness. The Tempter is our own wrestling with our true identity as sons and daughters of God.

The Sacred Creator of all that is, The God within and beyond us all, stamps 'Made of Divine Worth' on our hearts and declares to the universe, "this is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased!" The waters of our baptism shower us with Grace that is greater than any mis-step or mistake we could ever make. The Tempter challenges God's announcement that we are God's Beloved Sons and Daughters loved for who we are not what we do or what we own or how we look or who we love. The test for Jesus is whether Jesus trusts God's voice that announced his identity and trusts his life as God's Beloved. That holds true for all of us. In the face of our wilderness and wild beasts, that which scares us and threatens our ego, will we hold true to our identity as God's beloved?

On Wednesday, the church began a season of preparation and reflection called Lent. The forty days of the season reflect the forty days Jesus spent figuring out who he would be, what his ministry could be, if he would claim his identity as God's beloved child or allow the temptations of world or ego to get the best of him.

Our identity is signed and sealed as beloved, no matter what. No matter what we do or what others say of us. No matter of other's options or votes about us. No one can vote a child of God out of God's love and acceptance by the very nature of our creation. Our identities are in God. God saves us from allowing others to determine our worth. God saves us from falling for the Tempters voice. God saves us from allowing our own ego to brand us and center us in Self. That's our salvation in God.

Our brand is God's love stamped upon our hearts, dripped upon our foreheads, woven into the infinite depths of our being and the universe. When the tempter's voice whispers from within, listen for God's voice within that shouts all the louder, "You are my beloved. You are my sons and daughters. You are my beloved child. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Thanks be to God.