



“Clarity”

A Sermon Based on Luke 4:1-13
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, March 10th, 2019
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It was a spectacle that surrounded the baptism of Jesus. People from all over the countryside were coming to that isolated spot by the Jordan River to hear John preach, or to see who was coming, or to see what the fuss was all about. Those who came ranged from the sincere seekers, to the inquisitorial Pharisees, to the scoffers and skeptics, to the common folks, the kind who always show up simply because there is a crowd.

At the appointed time, Jesus walked into that mass of people. And he asked John to baptize him. When John did, it was as if the sky opened, and a voice that had to be the voice of God was heard to say, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.”

Some in the crowd no doubt heard the voice, and became fearful and agitated. The anxiety and uncertainty about what was happening must have raced through the heart of the crowd. What otherwise was a low rumble of voices instantly became loud and chaotic. Those on the edges of the crowd watched and wondered, “It was just thunder. Why is everyone acting like this?”

Luke doesn’t go into all of this detail, of course. He simply says that after Jesus was baptized, he was driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness. I imagine the Spirit said to Jesus, “Jesus, you’ve got to get out of here.”

And so he went. His ministry had begun. But instead of preaching or healing or teaching from the start, he was driven out into the solitude of the wilderness. He was ready, and yet he was not quite ready.

It seems he needed to face himself, to be sure of who he really was. God had just said, "You are my beloved son," but before he set about the work to which God had called him, he needed to struggle with what it meant to be God's son.

In the wilderness, then, he faced the temptations that would shadow him throughout his ministry. They were temptations that could lead him to deny himself, to deny his relationship with God, if he gave in to them.

What if temptation is not so much being tempted toward something, like doing something you're not supposed to do, but much more being tempted away from something?ⁱ Luke shows us how Jesus is tempted to turn away from his identity, and his relationship with God.

So he had to be sure of who he was. He had better to be sure before he stepped out onto the stage, because once he was out on the stage, he could leave no doubt. He had to be clear. In the wilderness he gained that clarity, and maintained it, all the way to the cross.

II

Now, not everyone is comfortable with this scene of temptation. The thought that Jesus was genuinely tempted, just as each one of us is tempted, just doesn't seem holy. Such discomfort, I think, is rooted in a misunderstanding of perfection, of what it means to be holy. And it is rooted in a confusion of temptation and sin.

That we are tempted does not make us guilty. It is the deed urged by the temptation that brings the guilt. Well do we profess that Jesus did not sin. But we speak falsely if we say that Jesus wasn't really tempted. As it is written in Hebrews, "...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15)

To deny that Jesus was genuinely tempted, is to deny at the same time that he was genuinely human. It is to deny the reality of the Incarnation. If Jesus was not tempted just like you and I are tempted, then the redemption he came to make real is not real.

The early church mothers and fathers said it best, “What is unassumed is unredeemed.” Since he was fully human, Jesus was tempted. And because he did not yield to temptation, he remained ever faithful to God and redeemed humanity.

From the beginning of his story, Luke is clear about the identity Jesus. He tells us about Gabriel’s visitation of Mary in which the angel told her that her son would be called Son of God. The long genealogy that Luke presents concludes with, “Son of Adam, Son of God.” And at his baptism, the voice of God said, “You are my son...”

The question that Jesus faced in the wilderness was what does it mean to be God’s son. Luke tells the story of the temptation of Jesus in 3 scenes. In each scene, the devil suggested an understanding of what it means to be God’s son. He tried to tempt Jesus away from that relationship. Jesus rejected each one.

III

Scene One. Will Jesus be the King of Fast Food?

Jesus had been fasting and praying and thinking in the wilds of the Judean desert. Nothing to eat. No company calling for a visit. Just bushes and birds, clouds and blazing sun and stones everywhere.

The tempter saw his first opportunity. “Jesus, you’ve held out for forty days. Nice job. God, your father, must be really proud of you. But God must know, too, how hungry you are. Look at all of those stones around here. Wouldn’t it be great if each of those stones was a loaf of good, warm bread? If you are God’s son, surely all you need to do is speak the word and bread they will become.”

When Jesus didn’t do anything, the tempter added, “Jesus, look around you. You’re all alone. No one will see. It will be your own little private act of

survival. No one will be hurt by it and you'll have all the food you want. Go ahead. Satisfy your genuine human need to eat."

Jesus thought, "Satisfy my need to eat by making stones into bread. Is that what being God's son means?" And he remembered the words Moses spoke to the nation of Israel as they were about to cross over into the promised land. Moses reminded the nation of their long journey in the wilderness, and in particular, of God's gift to them of manna. Moses told them never to forget that their need for bread was secondary to their need to understand that God alone gives bread.

Jesus understood this, and so he refused to use his power over nature to serve his appetites. He knew that there are no shortcuts to faithfulness. So he said, "One does not live by bread alone." And he remained hungry.

Scene Two. Will Jesus organize the first Political Action Committee?

With all of that quiet time alone, Jesus had plenty of time to think about that chaotic scene by the river at his baptism. How could he get people to listen to him? How could he begin to establish the kingdom of God among such a crowd as that?

The tempter had just the idea. "Jesus, my friend, come with me." And in some way, Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the world, with all of their different people, in an instant.

As Jesus surveyed the panorama, the devil said, "All of this could be yours, under your authority. It is, after all, mine as Prince of the Air, but I could see to it that everyone has to listen to you. You can do with them whatever you want. Monarchy, oligarchy, anarchy, however you want it. All of it I will give to you, for a small fee, of course. Worship me. Let me adopt you and it will all be yours."

This was an old temptation. Israel had struggled with it from the time they left Egypt. They just couldn't get over their sense of inferiority. They looked around at their neighboring nations, and they wanted to be like them. The neighbors seemed to have neat gods, gods that promised the world for next to nothing. And they had kings. So they cried out for their own king, and they gave

themselves up to worship other gods, gods which could not hear, or see, or feel, gods which had done not one thing for them, gods that were no gods, but were only idols. But they were gods that made no demands, only promises.

Jesus wondered, "Is this what it means to be God's son?" No. It does not mean this. There will be no shortcut to creating my kind of realm. It will be hard work. It will be deadly work. But there will be no other way. For I will be faithful to God." He refused to use his power over people for his own glory.

Scene Three. Will Jesus be King of the spoiled brat pack?

Twice, Jesus had relied on scripture and the history of his people to parry the devil. So the devil decided to take that tool and use it himself. After taking Jesus to the top of one of the pinnacles in the Temple, the devil said, "Alright, Jesus. You believe that you are God's son. Excellent. One of the psalms, written I believe by one of your great, great, great grandfathers, says, 'He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you stub your toe against a stone.' Let's clear the matter up right now. Jump, and let's see what daddy will do."

This temptation had a long history, too. It seemed God's people had forever been putting God on the spot. Jesus was not about to continue that tradition. Being God's true son would mean that Jesus would trust God, whether it was practical or not, whether it paid off or not. Being God's son would mean that he was committed to God's way, no ifs, ands or buts.

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test." And with that, the tempter left him. Perhaps, as he departed, he whispered, "You could have had it all, kid. But have it your way. Be hungry. Be a lone voice in the wilderness. See if you can get back to the city before you get eaten by one of those lions out here."

Jesus would have answered, "I will have it just that way. I will have my Father, and I will please him." And he did. He did because he left the desert clear about who he was.

IV

John wrote at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus gave us the power to become children of God. He made it possible for each of us to call God, "Abba,

Daddy.” Are you clear about who you are? Can you say what it means to be a child of God? And can you resist the tempter when he comes suggesting other possibilities, his possibilities, for what it means to be a child of God?

For that is how temptation most often works. We are tempted away from God, away from our identities. Our confidence in God gets undermined, eroded, weakened, along with our sense of who we are as God’s children.ⁱⁱ

And the temptations don’t have to be these exact ones Jesus faced, temptations focused on bread, power and safety. The temptations could just as well be focused on youth, beauty and wealth, or self-confidence, fame and security. The temptations change, but the object of the temptation is the same: “they seek to shift our allegiance, trust, and confidence away from God and toward some substitute that promises a more secure identity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus proved to be the Son of God Israel never was. He knew he needed more than just bread to live. He knew that no idol could take the place of God. He refused to bargain with God. He knew those things and he could do what he did because he knew who he was, whose he was.

Children of God, are you clear about who you are? So today I invite you to regain your clarity, to remember that you are baptized into a community, which means that none of us struggle alone. Today, remember your baptisms, and be thankful. AMEN.

ⁱ David Lose, “Lent 1C: Identity Theft,” on his *In the Meantime* blog, Feb. 9th, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.