

“God Moves...Into the Human Condition”  
March 10, 2019  
Second - Ponce de Leon Baptist Church  
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*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> where 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. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”*

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

*<sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him 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, <sup>10</sup> for it is written,  
  
‘He will command his 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.’”*

*<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

- The people of Israel, in their season of Exodus, spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, trying to learn to trust in the Lord.
- Moses spent 40 days on the top of Mount Sinai, listening for the word of the Lord, and when he came down, after his 40 days, Moses handed the tablets of God’s law to the people – the Ten Commandments.
- Elijah later climbed on top of that same mountain; he stayed for 40 days before hearing a still small voice.

- In our story for today, Jesus is in the wilderness – for 40 days, listening, discerning, being tempted to trust in something other than the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

These 40-day stories are the tradition that bring us the season of Lent. Our 40-day journey started Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, and today is the first Sunday of the forty-day season. The biblical stories are all different from each other and they are all different from our current context, but the 40-day question is the same, “*Will we serve and trust in something other than God’s call on our lives?*”

You have read in the AJC in the last couple of weeks, that the United Methodist Church has been in a major church debate that ended in a narrow vote. We pray for and support our Methodist friends and pastors who are in a season of unusual pain and fracture. But, sadly, the church in debate and division is not a new news item.

Unfortunately, as Hank Williams Jr. used to sing, “*They are just carrying on an old family tradition.*”<sup>2</sup> The Church has been arguing and dividing for as long as there has been the Church.

It is hard to imagine this as a dividing point, but one of the great historical debates of the Church was around today’s scripture and the question, “*Was Jesus ever really tempted?*” This is how the debate went:

- One side lined up this way – Jesus was incapable of sin. Their definition of sinless was that it was simply impossible for the Son of God to sin – *No posse peccare* – not possible to sin. (They liked to debate in Latin for some reason.)
- The other side of the argument said, *Posse non peccare* – Possible not to sin.

So, which is it?

- Jesus was not able to sin – no way, it just can’t happen, impossible.
- Or, Jesus was able not to sin – that is, he was strong enough to withstand what was a very real possibility?

Importantly, the Church decided that Jesus had a choice; Jesus could have sinned but did not. And this has every implication for us because if Jesus was not really tempted, then he wasn’t really human. Because we know, how painfully we know, that nothing is more core to the human experience than the agony of choice.<sup>3</sup>

After Jesus’ baptism, he did not get much of a honeymoon period. This temptation in the wilderness was right after his baptism; his hair was still wet when the spirit led him away. Luke has it a little nicer than Mark’s gospel which says that the spirit drove him into the wilderness.<sup>4</sup> In any case, at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, immediately following his baptism, Jesus experiences this 40-day anguish of discernment and temptation and choice.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p.46

<sup>2</sup> Hank Williams, Jr. “Family Tradition”

<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions*, p.46

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:12

Since one of the characters in today's story is a biblical figure we don't discuss much, perhaps we should stop for a minute and talk about the Devil. Some of you have met him already – spent significant time hanging out. Others of you may think you have never met him, but it is because he can be sneaky.

First, the Devil is personalized in scripture because evil comes at us in very personal and persuasive ways. And evil is not just the absence of good. Evil is too aggressive to just be the absence of something. The forces contrary to the will of God come aggressively and personally, which is why the scripture personifies evil as an entity.

Next, the Devil does not just reside out there. The Devil has an apartment in here – evil is out there, but evil resides in us as well.<sup>5</sup> I once heard preaching professor Eugene Lowery at a preaching conference and he was lecturing on the man with demons and Jesus commanding them into the swine. Dr. Lowery took a minute to talk about his theology of the Devil and he said that as a good Presbyterian, he did not believe in an actual, personal Devil. Then he said, *“And furthermore, I wish he would leave me alone.”*

But finally, the Devil is sly, subtle and often works within our best intentions. Remember from Genesis story – *“Eat from the tree in the middle of the garden and you will be like gods.”* The temptation was not a call to get in the gutter and use dirty needles. It was a call up. *“Look, you could be even greater, you could be like gods.”*

That is the subtle, tricky call that tempts Jesus in the wilderness. This is not an enticement to get down and dirty. The Devil plays on Jesus' best nature by offering reasonable choices that will pull Jesus away from his divine purpose. At the baptism, the voice of God declares, *“Thou art my beloved son.”* Now, still fresh from the waters, in the next biblical scene, the Devil says, *“If you are the son of God... command this stone to become a loaf of bread. You should doubt your identity in God. You are a carpenter's kid from Nazareth for crying out loud. You should doubt your identity... if you are the son of God.”*

And did you notice how reasonable the temptation – make bread for you and other hungry people. This is not a call to the gutter, *“Have a bite to eat. You are no good to anyone else unless you take care of yourself. Besides, look at all of the poor people and you have the power to turn rocks into bread. Remember, God helped Moses provide for peoples' hunger when God provided manna in the wilderness and you are better than Moses.”* The first temptation is to feed himself and others; what could possibly be wrong with that?

Then the Devil takes Jesus up on a high hill and Jesus looks down at the buildings of worship and power and commerce and politic and the Devil says 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours<sup>6</sup>. Besides, the people have been looking for and praying for a political messiah. They have been under the rule of Rome for so long, praying for political liberation. Wouldn't it be a good thing to use your power to set the people free from Roman rule? Come on, help your people.”* See, once again, a call to something good – that is still short

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<sup>5</sup> Coffin, p. 49

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:6

of God's best. It was still a variation from what God had called Jesus to do and Jesus has a clear idea about his identity and purpose.

Finally, the third temptation, is a temptation to fame. Again with "if" – *"If you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written..."* and the Devil quotes scripture to him. The Devil's strategy gets trickier still. *"Prove your holiness, prove your goodness, show these people who you are – the angels will catch you. Here, I have a scripture verse to prove my point. You believe the Bible, don't you?"*

It may take the highest level of discernment to penetrate someone trying to misuse an open Bible. Some of the most dehumanizing practices of our culture, have been advanced by people using the scriptures to justify their brand of meanness. And, good people have fallen for the seduction because – *"Well, it's in the Bible."*

So, do you follow the wiles of the Devil's argument and temptation? *"Jesus, you will not provide bread for the hungry; you will not provide freedom for the oppressed; and now you are telling me that you don't even trust that what the Bible says is true. Are you really the son of God?"*

Again, Jesus is not being tempted to buy weed in a dark alley. Jesus is being tempted in the space between good and best. He clearly has the moral strength to fend off what is plainly wrong. But only those with a rich prayer life, a deep sense of identity, and an abiding relationship with God, can negotiate the seductions that we can easily justify.

*Posse non peccare.* It was possible for Jesus to not sin, but it also had to be possible for him to give in and the Devil's arguments were persuasive calls to actions that Jesus could easily justify. But Jesus understood, more clearly than any of us, who he is and what it is he is called to do. God has become flesh, moved into the human condition, to identify with us. And nothing is more core to the human experience than the agony of choice.

In college, I was part of a social fraternity and a member of the ministerial association, which was a smaller sub-group of the Baptist Student Union. It was a group of about 20 of us who were headed to seminary to prepare for vocational ministry. I've told you the story before about how I had a crisis of faith in college because I did not identify with the guys in the ministerial association (and they were all guys) and so I thought I must not be called to ministry because I was not as pious as they were. One day, one of them actually said to me, *"Some days I don't sin. Some days, I'm so in tuned with God that I am able to not sin."* I thought, *"That is the craziest thing I've ever heard. I've probably sinned twice before breakfast every day."*

I'm sure that what he was trying to say was that sometimes, when he has a clear choice between good and bad, some days he always chooses the good over the bad, the clearly righteous over the clearly evil. Some days he did not lie, did not cheat, did not take drugs or hurt puppies. But the temptations that challenge us most are the things that look justifiable, that look like a call up. Staying firm in the face of temptation is sometimes not a decision between "yes" and "no". Sometimes it is a decision between "no" and "heck no". Discernment often means hearing the difference between good and better. And evil will use any persuasion to knock us off purpose, to

confuse our identity and cause us to operate out of fear instead of love. Any trick to get us to justify and negotiate until our purpose is eroded.

Stephen Covey famously said that, “*The only way to say no, is to have a bigger yes.*”<sup>7</sup> Jesus retreated regularly for prayer, to reconnect with his “*bigger yes*”. In prayer, Jesus came to understand that he is the child of God, sent here for a purpose. In prayer, Jesus came to understand with clarity, what that purpose looks like. And once you have a big and clear “yes”, you can muster the courage to say “no” when the agony of choice presents itself.

If you want to live with purpose, to choose meaning over happiness, to become the most loving version of yourself, then, like Jesus, you must find the power to master your choices – to live into your purpose on this earth. Therapist James Hollis says, “*No one rises in the morning and thinks, Today I will do the same stupid things I have done for decades. But chances are we will.*”<sup>8</sup> But we don’t have to - because we too have access to prayer. We have access to the communion with God that allows us to claim our identity, clarify our purpose, find our “*bigger yes*”. When we see our identity clearly, when we identify our purpose then we too can defend ourselves against the Devil’s games. We too can answer as Jesus did, “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*”

So, for the forty days of Lent, we commit ourselves to prayer. We give ourselves to removing our baggage and clarifying our purpose. Because it is in prayer that we grow the muscles to say “no” to temptation, because we are living in service to our “*bigger yes*”.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

<sup>8</sup> James Hollis, *Living An Examined Life*, p.81