

Seeking God's Ways

There are at least two very important words in this story. First of all, *the devil*. Who is the devil? It's his first appearance in the Gospel of Luke. And he's given no explanation. He's just sort of assumed. The Greek word *diabolos* literally means "the diabolical one." Is the devil the same thing as "*Satan*," by definition the adversary of God whose existence goes way back into the Old Testament? [*devil=Satan?*] Does the devil maybe work for Satan? Here's a thought: does the devil actually work for God? Does the work of the devil fulfill some divine purpose? Is the devil still active today? Where is he? Everywhere? (And does he really make us do things we don't want to do, like the comedian Flip Wilson used to say?)

Secondly, there is the important word *wilderness*. Where is the wilderness? Does it refer in this story to a particular geographical place in Palestine, the uninhabited hills east of Jerusalem, maybe, or west of the Jordan River where John the Baptist was known to hang out? Or is wilderness more a spiritual reality than a geographical one? A time and a space in which God is absent, or at least feels absent? A time and a space to be avoided at all costs? Unless maybe God has a reason for you to go there? Are you in such a space right now?

Let's recap. Jesus has just been baptized, by John, at the Jordan River. Luke tells us that he is "*full of the Holy Spirit*." The very spirit of God, the heart and mind of God, the power of God. He's ready to go—he's "loaded for bear," we might say in our vernacular. And now, that same *Spirit* (capital S) leads him into or *in the wilderness*. Almost as if this was God's will, something Jesus needed to do before he could begin his ministry, before he could fulfill what God had sent him into the world to do.

Luke says Jesus was in the wilderness *for forty days*. The number forty is an important one in the Bible, of course. In Genesis 7:12, we read how it rained for *forty days and forty nights*. Which was enough to wipe out all living creatures (except for those in the ark, of course). You could say the number forty represented God's anger and judgement, God's punishment, God's disappointed decision to give up and start over. The children of Israel wandered in the "wilderness" (there's that word again!) for *forty years* before God brought them to the Promised Land [*Numbers 13:34*]. It's as if they needed that much time in order to learn all over again how to trust God completely. Because they had apparently forgotten it the first time, and second, and third—had apparently complained one too many times. And no, forty days wouldn't have been nearly enough; it's going to take 40 years.

And now we have this story. The Spirit leads Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. How is the number 40 functioning here? Was God angry at Jesus about something? Wanting to punish him? Was God disappointed for some reason? We know, emphatically, that this is not the case. God had just said to Jesus, at his baptism, "*You are my Son [capital S], the Beloved [capital B], with you I am well pleased*" [Luke 3:33, last part].

Let's look again at these three temptations Jesus faced. Jesus was "*famished*," Luke says. That's a strong word, isn't it? Actually, that's just the NRSV's translation; Luke simply says he was hungry. Well of course he was; he hadn't eaten anything. God created us to be hungry, to need and to crave food, at least three times a day. (I don't know about you, but I'm always hungry.) Jesus is experiencing real human hunger.

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (the devil said to him). “If?!” God had just told Jesus he was his Son (capital S). Remember? But did Jesus remember, amidst these grueling 40 days? Or worse, did he ever even believe he was the Son of God? Maybe he believed it at first, but surely he had come to doubt it. “Prove it to yourself,” the devil was saying. Just one, teeny-tiny miracle. One quick command. One snap of the fingers.

But Jesus saw through the devil’s charade. “That’s okay, Mr. Devil. I know who I am.” And he quotes Scripture. [*It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’*] Not just any scripture. Deuteronomy 8:3. In which Moses is reminding the children of Israel who they are. Children of a God who wants them to know that there are things more important in life than bread. Let your first hunger—your most important hunger—be for God. Jesus remembered. First test passed. Good job Jesus.

What are we hungry for? Are we hungry first and foremost for God? Do we turn first and foremost to God, to satisfy our human hunger? Or do we turn to Pizza Hut?

Next, the devil led Jesus up to the top of a mountain, where God always tended to reveal himself, where all the most important events in Jesus’ ministry would take place. (So we can assume this must be one of them.) “You’ll want to make sure you do this right, Jesus,” the devil seemed to be saying. “Make sure you’re absolutely ready. Tell you what. Why don’t I give you all the kingdoms of the world? Every one. In one fell swoop. It will make things way easier for you. Just do me a favor first and worship me a little. No big deal!”

Jesus saw right through it. It is a big deal. There are no shortcuts. No quick and easy way to be what God wants us to be and do what God wants us to do. Because what God wants us to be and do is hard. Again Jesus sends the “diabolical one” to Scripture [*It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’* ”], to the foundational book of Deuteronomy. Where God through Moses commands the children of Israel to worship only one thing. No matter how hungry you are. Or uncertain. Or afraid. Or lost. Or discouraged. Second test past. Well done, Jesus.

Whom or what do we worship, in addition to God? Money? Security? Freedom? “It’s no big deal,” the devil is saying to us. “It’s okay to worship other things beside God,” the devil tells us. “You know, as long as it’s ‘on the side.’”

Finally, the devil took him to Jerusalem. The most important, most holy city of the world. To the very tippy-top of the temple, the famous place where all people of the world would come sooner or later. “Make a big splash, Jesus. Start off your ministry with a huge success. It’s all about success. Here’s one little thing that even your own Scripture says is okay [*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.’*] You can look it up, Jesus: Psalm 91. Throw yourself off of here, and let God’s own angels take care of you. Everyone will see it, and boy will they be impressed. Give God’s power a little test drive. God will be happy to oblige.”

A third time, Jesus turns to Scripture [*It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’* ”], to the Book of Deuteronomy, which is even more foundational than Psalm 91, to Deuteronomy 6:16, where Moses commands his people to never put God to the test.

In what ways big or small are we tempted to test God? What big splash do we want to make? When in our lives has success become more important to us than faithfulness?

We are in the wilderness, people. God's own Spirit [capital S] is leading us. The devil is standing by to assist (although assist whom, God or Satan, we're never really sure). It's called the Season of Lent. It's a period of 40 days (not counting Sundays). Think of it as the perfect time for a refresher course. A much-needed reminder that our job is to seek God's ways, not our own. Are you ready? Here we go.

Amen.

Questions for Pondering and Discussion

- 1) Is the devil still active today? Where is he?
- 2) In the Bible, we find "wilderness" to be "a time and a space in which God is absent, or at least feels absent?" Are you in such a space right now?
- 3) How might the Biblical writers apply the number 40 to our time and place?
- 4) What are we hungry for? Are we hungry first and foremost for God? Do we turn first and foremost to God, to satisfy our human hunger? Or do we turn to Pizza Hut?
- 5) Whom or what do we worship, in addition to God? Money? Security? Freedom? "It's no big deal," the devil is saying to us. "It's okay to worship other things beside God," the devil tells us. "You know, as long as it's 'on the side'."
- 6) In what ways big or small are we tempted to test God? What big splash do we want to make? When in our lives has success become more important to us than faithfulness?