Lent 1 3.8.25

Take That Satan! The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

The Great Litany that brought us into church today reminded me of the people of Israel making their great procession to the Jordan River at the invitation John the Baptist. You remember that story where John called his people to repent of their sinful ways and come to him to be baptized. That was good old fashioned prophetizing, and the people of Israel came in droves. *Good Lord deliver us.*

And among them was Jesus. And the author of Luke tells us that by the time Jesus stepped out of the river and dried off and was praying, God had begun to answer Israel's prayers for deliverance. In fact God provided them a messiah right there on the spot:"The heaven was opened," according to Luke's gospel, "and the Holy Spirit descended upon (Jesus) in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'[d]

There are two others who are called Son of God in the Scriptures – In Luke's genealogy of Jesus, Adam, the first man, is called son of God.[1] … In the book of Exodus, God calls Israel, "my first-born son."

Which is interesting. When we say "Son of God" I usually think of the divinity of Jesus, especially when you think about Jesus' birth stories. But Son of God also describes the humanity of Jesus, the kind of humanity that God always intended for his creation, the kind that fiercely holds on to its relationship with God even when it is put to the test.

Which brings us to the next stop in Luke's Gospel. Right after Jesus is baptized, he is filled with the Holy Spirit who drives him out into the desert where he is plagued by the devil for 40 days. We don't know what form that took for most of that time; we just know about the final three things that he struggled with.

Most translations call them temptations. And I appreciate how comforting it can be to have a savior who is tempted to do bad things like the rest of us are, but managed to avoid them better than we do. But more recent translations of this story[2] prefer the word tests. And I think that word makes this a different and more interesting story: The testing of Jesus in the desert. Because a test determines if you are ready for something. And everything was about to change in Jesus' life.

After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, and after the voice from heaven declared him God's favored son, Jesus's understanding of what it meant to be the Son of God was tested for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. The wilderness is often the place of testing for God's people. Forty is that powerful biblical number that means big transitions and transformations are afoot -- Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, Moses prayed and fasted for 40 days and nights on Mt Sainai before he received the 10 commandments. And the Holy Spirit drove Jesus to that same place to pray and fast and wrestle

[1] See Richard W. Swanson's commentary on Luke 4:1-13 on the Working Preacher website, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-41-13-6.

[2] See the New Revised Standard Version Updated (NRSVU) version of this text (https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%204&version=NRSVUE)

with the devil, who was an old tester from way back – you'll remember his work in the Garden of Eden and the Book of Job.

When Jesus passed those tests, his real ministry as the Son of God, the messiah of God's people, began.

Our own 40-day Lenten journey begins with the story of Jesus's testing in the desert because it's important that we know who we are following on this journey to the cross and to the life that is on the other side. These tests tell us who Jesus is and who God is and who we are called to be as Jesus' followers and God's people. We might even consider them our tests as well, a guide to our own Lenten practice.

In the first test, the devil suggests that Jesus turn the stones before him into bread, and feed himself with them. To me that always sounded like the devil was trying to get Jesus to use his divine abilities to feed himself, use his powers to serve his own needs. But I wonder if it might mean something else. Jesus had been prayerfully fasting for 40 days. He was hungry. Perhaps hungry enough to eat anything. And the devil was saying to him, why not give up this ridiculous prayerful fast and feed yourself with what's at hand. You could make these stone into bread, if you have the power of a son of God.

Jesus's answer to that test question was the same answer that Israel already had in its own story. Jesus quotes Moses speaking to the people after his own 40 days on Mt Sinai, where he reminds the people that God gave them manna in the desert so they would understand that "one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

When the devil invited Jesus to feed himself, Jesus recalls that God has always been the source and sustainer of his people's life and his life -- and not anyone or anything else – not even himself.

I think it's also interesting that the devil was suggesting that Jesus feed himself with something that is not actually food. I'm reminded of the passage in the Gospel of Matthew (7:9-10) where Jesus asks: Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? ...how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?"

I wonder if Jesus was thinking back on the devil's question of him in the desert?

A Lenten question for us might be: what is being offered to me as bread that is actually a stone? And who or what is offering it to me? We live in a society whose economy relies on non-stop consumption, and on the creation of hungers and appetites to keep up the demand to consume more and more. And more often than not we are offered a stone and told to turn it into bread.

Lent invites us to ask: where do I find the bread of life that my very being requires? How does God offer it to me? Am I choosing to consume the bread that truly sustain me – or something else?

Next, Jesus is faced with the offer to receive earthly power in exchange for giving his heart and mind and strength (for this is what worships is) to something other than God. The test was whether Jesus would trade his very birthright as the Son of God, in exchange for the kind of power and glory that only this world can give. Again, Jesus responds with the words of Moses, which are at the heart of the covenant God made with Isreal: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' Jesus chooses to remain God's

son and God's own, the inheritor of God's glory and power, which is very different from the world's version of those things.

The Lenten question for us might be: who or what is offering us authority and glory if we just give our hearts and minds and strength over to it? What is asking our obedience, compliance, our uncritical allegiance in exchange for the power to dominate others, and the glory of putting ourselves and interests before all else? Who is saying worship me instead of God?

And if our choice is to worship God alone, then what does giving God our hearts, and minds and strength truly require of us – not just on Sunday morning but every other day as well?

Finally the devil takes Jesus to the heights of the Temple and suggests that Jesus test God's fidelity to him – throw yourself down to see if God will really catch you when you fall. This is such a tricky test because it challenges Jesus' own assurance of God's commitment to him. He is being challenged to test God's side of the Covenant with Isreal, God's part of the love relationship. Make God give proof, the devil suggests. And Jesus again turns to Moses for guidance. Moses' original words were: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test as you did at Massah." Massah was the place in the desert where Israel complained bitterly that God was not giving them water and demanded Moses test God's fidelity to them.

Jesus essentially says I will trust God rather than test God. Jesus will be tested again on this subject in the Garden at Gethsemane, when Jesus accepts his impending death as an act of obedience to God rather than evidence that God has abandoned him.

The Lenten question for us is, what do we do when we find ourselves caught in the belief that our good fortune is proof of God's love and fidelity and our suffering is proof of either God's rejection, or worse, evidence that there is no God at all? I think this is the point where many people's faith in God is sorely tested, and many walk away. Can we trust that God is with us even when we don't feel like God is there?

These 40 days will take us right into the heart of Jesus' suffering, and of God's suffering with him. It will take us into the heart of disillusionment, betrayal, oppression, torture and death. And it will insist that this is the path to life. The question for us this Lent, is will we again follow Jesus, our messiah, down this road believing fully that it is the path to eternal life with God?

I think the followers of Jesus cherished the idea that Jesus was tested intensely and often, because their faith was tested intensely and often, as is ours. And that is because life itself is constantly asking us to choose God again and again in the face of other offerings. Jesus' followers knew that sometimes they would pass the test of faith with flying colors, and sometimes they would fail. But because Jesus passed that test with his very life, they would never be lost to God. The offer of God's love and forgiveness would always be a choice to make and make again. That is what Jesus leads us to at the other end of these 40 days.

So take that, Satan. Amen.