

Sermon delivered at Saint Michael and All Angels, South Bend
The Rev Matthew Cowden

February 14, 2016

Luke 4:1-13, Jesus' Tests after Baptism

Make an intimate, deeply personal relationship with God primary. "It's HIM"

*(If you know Him well you may say *Her* but one cannot be in relationship with an *It*.)*

In the summer of 1992 Melissa and I were married and immediately afterwards, we moved from Miami to Los Angeles, trekking for two weeks across the country. This was our honeymoon. We stayed in some nice places along the way but we also camped, like you do, as young newlyweds with little money. We drove a Honda civic, with no air conditioner, with black vinyl seats, through Texas, in the middle of July. Did I mention we had no air conditioner? We had "Just Married" across the back window of our car and in every state, several times a day, we would get a honk from another car, a wave of congratulations with other motorists craning their necks to see what this newlywed couple looked like. (Going through Reno everyone assumed we had just gotten married so we would tell them the Elvis chapel was a blast.) One hot day across Texas, hot, no a/c we had been on the road for a week at that point and Melissa and I were in the middle of a full blown argument (about money, of course, that's what most couples argue about). Right at the fevered pitch of our argument, with the car windows down for some air, we hear a loud, cheery double honk from a passing van at just the right height to see fully into our newlywed fight and we wave back and angry, hostile faced "thank you!" And we're sure they drove away thinking, "oh they're going to last!"

The honeymoon in the desert that Melissa and I got to have is not unlike the honeymoon in the desert that God had with the Israelites coming out of Egypt. Melissa and I look back on ours and think, wow, we should've done that differently, that was not much of a honeymoon. The Israelites didn't think the desert time was much of a picnic, either, complaining to God "What, did you bring us to die in the desert because there were no graves in Egypt, O Lord?!" There were testings and trials and pain and hunger and death and it is remembered as a hardship. Yet! God sees that time as a honeymoon. Israel was never closer to Yahweh than when they were most dependent on him as a people together, undergoing these hardships, together. God longingly, lovingly recalls this time, with the prophets, speaking on behalf of Yahweh continuing to recall that desert dependency as such holy and intimate time. As the Israelites challenged, tested and complained bitterly to God any outsider looking into this desert relationship would exclaim, "Oh, yeah, sure, they're going to last!"

This desert testing is the scripture I wish we had as the first reading this morning because it more properly sets us up to understand what Jesus is going through in his trials and testing from our Gospel reading today. Here in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel Jesus is living through the same kind of desert testing that the Israelites did in their honeymoon with Yahweh. Jesus has to recapitulate the history of humanity in himself. Which is why, just prior to this 40 days in the desert story, Luke has just listed the genealogy going back to Adam. Jesus is to be fully the son of a man, son of Adam. And then, by going into the wilderness, he is living out the history of the chosen people of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here in the wilderness, the desert, Jesus is living out the same dependency on God as the Israelites, with similar testing.

And let's be clear, this is a TEST not a temptation.

Luke's word is meant to indicate test by the Greek word: Peirasmos, a test. And as we look at what the devil is doing we can see that they are not temptations in the usual sense.

(Who's giving up chocolate for lent?)

A temptation like chocolate would be easy to recognize as, a true temptation invites us to an act in a way that we can recognize is wrong, unhelpful or that we know is bad for us. A test, however, sounds like a really good idea. A test is an offer of something that sounds reasonable, sounds like something we should be doing. And that's where the Satan enters and says, "Have I got a deal for you!"

"Jesus, you're the Messiah, right? If you are, then shouldn't a Messiah be doing something about the hungry?" When a savior comes we expect life to be better for the poor and hungry. We expect access to food and clean water will improve when the good one comes or gets placed into the highest office. Our health and our food security is one of the litmus tests we have for our leaders. Life on this planet is to be better, and shouldn't it start with the one who is the Messiah? So what's your feeding program, Jesus? Let's get this process started and start working some miracles. And Jesus tells the devil, "No. You've got it backwards and your priorities all wrong." I wonder if the devil argued back and tried to disprove him. After all, the cry of the hungry poor, whether in South Bend or the third world should move our heart to want to alleviate suffering. Greater than Moses, Jesus refuses to supply the meal in the desert that will make the hunger go away. Why? Something greater than Moses is here.

The same happens in the other two desert tests by the devil. The devil offers power through politics. Could you imagine if Jesus were on the political party ticket? Pick your party. Now we could really get those Messianic programs going. Organize the people of the land to do the work of the kingdom and we can have peace and prosperity. All you have to do is admit doing so is an end in and of itself and for our own glory, safety and security.

What? Jesus says no to that, too? It's about God you say, Messiah man? It's about his glory and power? Then come to the Church, the Temple, the Synagogue, the holy place where we can agree that God dwells. "May the Force be with you!" That force has promised to uphold you, show the world, prove it! Demonstrate radical trust in the one in whom we live and move and have our being. If you are the Messiah, then that shouldn't be that hard, because you are the Messiah, aren't you?

That's where we are, most of us, in relationship with Jesus. We are the ones asking Jesus, pleading, testing him with, "If you are the son of God...." In this story we sometimes see ourselves as Jesus, especially in Lent, as the ones trying to resist temptation, and through Jesus we will succeed. However, most of us, most of the time are really in the place of the devil challenging Jesus with the same test, "If you are the son of God...here's what I need" "Jesus, I'm a faithful Christian, I pray, I love my church, my spirituality, I'm mostly a good person and I want to do more for you, be a better person, help others and could really be a better parent, employee, church member and make the world a better place if you could just give me a little more money, a little more time, a little more patience, better health, better job, ...because IF

you are the son of God you would help me to do, get and be these kinds of things...” We’re not asking unreasonable things, we’re not asking for bad things, we would be even better people than we are now, just think of the good we could do if we just had 20% more of any of those things... and Jesus’ response is the same to us... “Since you began by asking “If you are” then you don’t know me or my Father; you don’t have a relationship with me or him.” You’ve got your perspective wrong, priorities are wrong. You’ve missed the point of recognizing who you are talking to. God is not to be used that way. You’re assuming a kind of relationship that is not a real relationship.

He knows the things we ask are good. He actually wants those things for us and for the world but not out of the testing place we approach him on by asking “If you are...” He refused to turn stones to bread yet he still feeds the 5000 in a miracle. He refused to be placed in a position of great political power yet proclaims the justice of the kingdom of God with abandon. He refused to test God by a Temple jump yet he places his whole trust in God’s plan for his life by going to the cross. Jesus eventually does the miracles that he refuses to do when the devil asks but he enters into those miraculous acts differently. How so? We must know the one we are asking. Intimately, seekingly, even dependently.

Put another way we might rightfully ask, “So what did Jesus bring us if not a feeding ministry? If the kingdoms of this world look nothing like the reign of God in the 2000 years since he came, what happened? Why did the Messiah not suddenly inaugurate a golden age? What did Jesus bring us?” The simple answer is: He brought us God. He came to bring us into a deep, intimate, desert dependant, face-to-face relationship with God. It is what has endured the rise and fall of kingdoms and so-called Christendom. Like the mustard seed, this relationship is almost as light as the air it rides on, seems to almost disappear and like the shrubbery it produces seems all too easily uprooted. What did he bring us: faith hope and love. It is only because our hard hearts that we miss the enduring and subversive nature of those fruits.

Our call is to make our relationship with God a primary one. That is the sum of all these three tests. Asking, “If you are” assumes a secondary relationship and mixes up our priority by asking/testing. Only when we are in a desert dependency on God, by being his intimate people, will we be given the grace to actually do those things that are good, miraculous and life changing. As long as we are in a secondary relationship with God we will continue to see God and the Church as a filling station for our spirituality, or as an aspirin for our glut of materialism or continue to approach God’s church as a platform for our own agenda driven programs, no matter how noble and helpful we think they are. Filling station, aspirin or agenda platform? Then we are not in relationship with the one who is Love; and if we have not a relationship with the one who is Love, then we in the church are just a clanging gong.

Here’s a clue as to how to recognize whether you are in an intimate relationship with the Holy One who is Love. It comes from Lewis Carroll’s, *Alice in Wonderland*. At the tea party Alice is exasperated by the Mad Hatter asking riddles that have no answer. She’s fed up with his nonsense and finally,
Alice sighed wearily. ‘I think you might do something better with the time,’ she said, ‘than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.’

`If you knew Time as well as I do,' said the Hatter, `you wouldn't talk about wasting IT. It's HIM.'

`I don't know what you mean,' said Alice.

`Of course you don't!' the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. `I dare say you never even spoke to Time!'

We must stop thinking about God as IT, it's HIM

It's a daily relationship that must be nurtured, must be primary, not secondary or an add on to your life and needs. Know that love that made you, sustains you and saves you intimately, know Him. Be desert dependent on him.

We love to joke, "May the Force be with you..." "And also with you."

But you cannot have a relationship with an IT, cannot have a desert honeymoon with an IT. God is intensely personal, intimate.

And yes, if you have a deep, every day relationship with HIM then yes, you may even say HER.

This doesn't mean life will be easy in the desert, Melissa and I still hope for a better honeymoon one day; and I'm sure the Israelites would have preferred less deadly wandering to get to the Promised Land; Jesus was surely famished. But we are never closer than on our desert honeymoon and that's the start of a beautiful, life long relationship. Seek ye first the honeymoon of God and his relationship. Then all these things shall be added unto you. Then you will be given the grace to do all such good works as he has prepared for us to walk in. Then greater miracle ye shall see and do. Then it makes the Easter we are preparing for make sense. This Lent, make an intimate, deeply personal relationship with God primary. "It's HIM"

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