Wilderness Resistance

A meditation on Luke 4: 1 – 13

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church March 10, 2019

Some 25 years ago I was seated at a banquet table with my sister. It was one of those “head tables” for the important people, the ones receiving awards. I wasn’t one of those! I was fortunate enough to sit there because my sister, along with others, was being honored for her work in the field of Christian formation. All I had to do was sit there, make conversation and appreciate a chicken dinner. But it was terrifying. It was terrifying because everyone at that table was a published author…except me! To my right, I would be fine: my sister was there. But to my left?? Who would be seated there, and how in the world would I make conversation? Or worse, would they only speak to the person on their left, while my sister spoke with the friend to her right? What would I do then: smile and chew my chicken??

Then it happened, the man on my left introduced himself. He was Martin E. Marty, whose name you may not recognize, but in divinity school circles is extremely well known. He taught for 35 years at the University of Chicago, primarily in the divinity school. He has published over 50 books and too many articles to count. He was also senior editor for the *Christian Century* magazine for many years. A brilliant man. I knew of his brilliance, but soon I would experience his kindness.

After I told him my name, he responded, “And what do you do?”

“He thinks I have a reason for being here!” I thought to myself. “I’m just Lib’s sister…” I responded.

“Well, of course you are, but you are more than that. Tell me about yourself.”

And so, I told this highly respected academic, this famous historian, a little about my life as a mother of three sons who worked a few hours a week at the church in the area of children’s ministry. I’m sure Martin Marty has had wittier, more fascinating conversation partners, but that evening, in the moments before the program began, over a meal of baked chicken and green beans, he reminded me that my identity was rooted in my Creator through his care. It wasn’t a dialogue between a famous individual and an unknown, an award recipient and a “nobody. It was a conversation between two children of God. The briefest encounters can do wonders for the self-esteem.

Identity can be a difficult thing to hold on to sometimes.

As we enter the wilderness with Jesus, we might discover that this is a place of empowerment as well as risk. We might discover that this place is where our identity as God’s beloved children is solidified. That’s exactly how it transpired for Jesus.

As the story goes, Jesus fasted for 40 days. Forty days of prayer and solitude. Animals, birds, vegetation were his companions. The cloud formations, the rising and setting sun, the stars and moon, these kept him company as he strengthened himself for the work that awaited him. Soon he would be continually surrounded by people. People who needed love, people who needed hope, people who longed to be gathered in by God’s saving embrace. To be able to do all that would be asked of him, he needed to be sure of who he was called to be.

Each temptation invites him to deny his identity, and each temptation was designed to get under his skin in a different way. The social temptation of turning stones to bread; the temptation to power, of holding the world in his hand; the spiritual temptation of testing God and God’s angels. To give in to these would be to deny his identity as God’s beloved child. Fred Craddock writes:

*Give the tempter his due: the timing is perfect. Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out a demon, or healed a sick person. He is alone and hungry in the desert, poised at the edge of his ministry. What will be its nature and shape? (Interpretation: Luke, p. 55)*

Let’s take a look at these three scenarios. In each of them we see the reversals for which Jesus is famous. He not only turns the tables on who is in and who is out, who is first and who is last, but he also reverses the plot line. The story of humanity’s incessant hunger and greed for things that won’t last becomes a story of God’s celebration of a fulfilment that heals and unites.

Stones to bread. Remember Adam and Eve? They had everything: every fruit, every vegetable they could ever want. And God didn’t even tell them they had to eat all their peas before they went out to play. They fell for a lie. The evil one told them they would “be like God” if they ate from the fruit at the center of the garden. What a cruel trick! They were already made in God’s image, filled with God’s very breath. They took and ate the fruit and their minds were flooded with fear, distrust, envy, greed. They were blinded to their own identity as God’s beloved, and so God sent them out into the wilderness to rediscover who they were, to rediscover the source of life.

Jesus, is confronted with a food choice. Famished, he is tempted to transform stones into bread. He is tempted to eat that what he should not. Unlike Adam and Eve, he is so deeply grounded in his identity, that he can say “no.” He can say no to something that would only sustain him for an hour or so. He *will* perform miracles with food: water becomes wine, a small lunch becomes a feast, but as God needs, for God’s people rather than as the temptation to break a fast.

In Luke’s telling of the story, the evil one then offers Jesus the world, the whole world. This doesn’t make sense. Don’t we sing, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands?” I’m pretty sure that “his” refers to Jesus and not the evil one. As Luke sees it, the world is temporarily driven by evil. It *is* in human hands, and humans are accident prone mistake makers. Children of God but mistake-makers even so! The evil’s offer is no offer at all, but just another trick. It is the magician’s sleight of hand. “Here’s the world,” the trickster says. “Want to hold it? All you have to do is call me ‘Master,’ and it’s all yours!” Which doesn’t actually work out so well. If the world is already being held- temporarily – in the hands of evil, and God’s own son promises to worship evil, then this world would forever belong to evil. That is not a power that Jesus wants. Our Creator is not in the business of controlling us. Our Creator is in the business of healing us from the many ways our lives are fractured by the powers of the world. Jesus, sure of his identity, says no to a power that will bring only pain. The world belongs to Jesus. It is simply a matter of time, and the time is not yet.

Finally, Luke has the evil one offer Jesus a spiritual invitation. Luke intentionally ends the story at the temple in Jerusalem. That is the city where Jesus will end his days. That is the city which will execute him. That is the city where temptation will assail him on every front, and so, Luke ends the wilderness story here. “If, if, if,” the evil one says. “If you are…” There is no “if” about Jesus’ identity, but the world can wear you down. The world will always try to wear you down, just as it tried to wear down Jesus.

I have always imagined the evil one to be suggesting that Jesus could do a lovely swan dive off the peak of the temple, the angels dramatically catching him and placing him on the ground. All around the crowds would be in awe. They would burst into applause. They would know that Jesus is, without doubt, the son of God. Craddock sees it differently. He sees no crowds. The only witness to the leap would be the evil one. The only reason to leap would be to prove to the evil one that Jesus is the son of God. The only other reason to leap would be to prove to himself that he is the son of God. That is probably the most vulnerable reason of all.

Evil knows our doubts. Evil knows how to play on our vulnerabilities. Evil knows how to turn an innocent remark into a wound. Evil knows how to turn an omission into an injury. Evil knows how to turn a rejection by a person into a rejection by God. Evil knows how to turn a wise question into a despairing doubt. Yet none of those things are equivalent.

And let us not ignore the note of caution here: to misuse scripture is a dangerous endeavor. That was the evil one’s mistake. He misappropriated scripture over and over again. The Church has done the same thing: employing scripture to justify slavery, to defend segregation, to exclude women in leadership, to celebrate prosperity gospel, to denounce LGBTQAI individuals. Misappropriating scripture will fail every time, so we better be careful how we use it. In scripture, we can find our identity, but we can also lose our way, when we force it to say something which it does not.

“Who am I?” Jesus asks. “The beloved Son of God, the beloved Son of God. The beloved Son of God.” The voice echoes in his ears. With no need to prove himself, he could turn away from evil’s questions. He could turn back to the path that would lead him on to offer love to a broken world.

He would meet fears and doubts and questions again and again and again. But he was rooted in a strong sense of his own identity. The power of this knowledge would enable him to endure every bitter and dark moment of the cross. All the rejection, all the humiliation, all the disappointed faces. He would endure it all and return to us with the promise that we, too, can endure.

Look what he said to Peter, who denied him, who broke his heart! He said, “Remember who you are! You are the feeder of sheep. You are the flock tender. You are the rock, even when you crumble a bit around the edges. Peter, remember who you are!”

Beloved child of God.

Let us give Thanks to God, who calls us to remember!

Sources: Justo L. Gonzalez: Luke, A theological commentary on the Bible; Fred Craddock: Luke, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year C.