

The tone was set this week on Wednesday. The focus we share during the season of Lent is on sin - sin within ourselves and the sin that plagues the world. We are called in this season to bravely examine our sin - the sin within us and the sins of society (sins in which we participate and that we perpetuate). We do this by holding firmly the promises of God's love and mercy spoken over our us in baptism. Remembering our baptism, we are made brave to acknowledge our sin, to reveal our guilt, to confess our transgressions and receive God's forgiveness. In other words, Lent is a time in which we examine our sin - all that alienates us from God - all the while seeking to be more and more centered in God.

There is so much to this gospel story. It is well familiar of course but it has a layered texture of meaning that can be overwhelming to engage. In one way it's a parable of lent - our own wilderness walk in which the temptation to turn from God, to hide our face and deny our wrongdoing, is ever near. In another way, we can hear this story as an illustration of his divinity - his ability to do what no human can do, holding firm in the face of temptation. We can hear it as a lesson on the centrality of scripture in Christian life and resisting the devil. But in yet another way, we could see this story as a turning point in Matthew. For up until now we've been learning who Jesus is - we've heard it from an angel in a dream, from wise men bearing gifts, and from John the Baptist. But in this story, Jesus is finally coming to grips with who he is. He is struggling with his vocation.

So it's in this way that I want us to look at this story - as Jesus' struggle with vocation. It's a good way to read this story for us, at this time in Messiah's history - as we look forward to stepping into a new building, a new "set of clothes" you might say. It is a new outfit for this community that will need breaking in, that we will need to learn to wear. In some ways it will shape our sense of vocation, our call through the life of baptism that we share. And in other ways, we will shape it in our sense of who God is calling us to be. We hope that eventually it will be a place where all people can safely engage such questions for themselves and also shape our discovering of it together. As Jesus shows us here, it will be a struggle at times.

What lies just behind this story is Jesus' baptism. Remember that? The heavens are opened to him, the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove, and the voice from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Well, that Spirit leads him not to a place of joy and comfort, satisfaction or relief, but to a dry, desolate, inhospitable, and depleting place - to wilderness.

As well we know, there's a difference between baptism and the baptismal life. The whole process of confirmation for Lutherans is for the purpose of encountering what our baptism means, wrestling with the consequences of it and trying to figure out what we're going to do about it. In other words, it's about wrestling with our vocation, the call of God to us through baptism. Having just received the claim and heard a call, could this be precisely what Jesus was doing for 40 days in this desert wilderness - "wrestling with the nature of his calling" (Bailie 204)?

Jesus' 40 day discernment of the question of his calling is shaped by some of the disciplines of Lent: He is fasting and praying. And after 40 days, Matthew tells us he was “famished.” Dwell there for a minute. Have you ever been famished? It’s a physical feeling I get in the afternoon when I’ve skipped lunch. But famished is deeper, a state of mind and heart that speaks to both a longing and lack in life. It’s a spiritual hunger for something you don’t have but need. I wonder what that could have been for Jesus at the end of his 40 days.

The tempter arrives right then, having waited for Jesus to be at his most depleted. He casts doubt at Jesus: “IF you are the Son of God...” he starts, “feed yourself.” “Take the food” “Take what you need.” This is an old play on his part - the original script, so to speak. But Jesus knows his Old Testament and sees through it. But more than that he recognizes that food isn’t what he’s after. Perhaps what he’s after is a clarifying word from God - “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

It’s worth seeing that in the face of temptation, words from scripture were the words at hand for Jesus. Not a copy of the Lutheran Study Bible, but scripture committed to memory, “written on the tablets of his heart.” The devil has taken note of this retort and tempts again - this time using scripture himself. “Throw yourself down; for it is written...” he says. Jesus leans again on the scriptures, saying, “Again it is written...” or “It is also written...”.

Permit me a quick aside

- these words (It is also written) are the foundation of Christian (and maybe a particularly Lutheran) hermeneutical tradition. In other words, the way we read the bible. To quote Matthew Myer Boulton, "That little phrase 'it is also written' is the indispensable basis and refrain of Christian biblical interpretation" (On Our Way p28). Even the devil recognizes the importance of scripture. But while the devil simply pulls out a verse to sow doubt in Jesus, Jesus, having learned the same scriptures, fires back a verse from the overarching message he reads there - one centered in the love of God: "God has called me beloved," he says, "and I trust it to be true."

You see, "It is also written" prepares us to contest every false claim about God that uses scripture as backing. And the scripture we use is always and ever out of the overarching message of God's saving, unconditional love. Make sense?

Back to our story. Jesus has been contending not only with the devil, but with temptation. Famished, Jesus has been struggling against temptation, whether from without or from within. Who am I, what am I called to do, what did that baptism mean? The devil has been bested twice and, laying aside the gloves, pulls out his Ace in the hole: Taking Jesus to a very high mountain, showing him all the kingdoms of the world "and their splendor," says, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus responds in force. But it is nothing about force that sends the temptor packing. It is a moment of realization for Jesus from this mountain top view of “the world.” Gil Bailie calls this moment “the mental and moral breakthrough that would set [the course of] Jesus’ ministry...” He sees it in the sudden name change Jesus makes: “Away with you, Satan!”

This is the first time we see the word *Satan* in Matthew’s gospel - so far the *tempter* and the *devil* have been used interchangeably. The “devil” in Greek is *diabolos* - as in diabolical: *Dia* meaning “across” and *Bollos* meaning to “throw” or “cast.” “It means one who maligns, or slanders, or sows discord and division. The devil breeds animosity, he sows resentment (Bailie 204).” This division is familiar to Jesus who knows the old story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent: he has seen this story played out in his own people again and again. It’s a shape that sin takes in society.

Has this been the devil’s goal from the start of his “tempting” Jesus? Has he been subtly trying to divide Jesus from the God-given identity he’s just heard coming out of the water? Whether or not it is, Jesus demonstrates that he recognizes another shape of the tempter’s power when he uses the word “Satan” to name him. For *a satan* means “Accuser.” ***

Here we see the journey of Lent in its fullness. It might only be the first Sunday but our eyes are squarely fixed on the cross where Jesus is headed. I wonder if Jesus could see it from where he stood on that mountain, what was waiting for him. I wonder if he could see all the division that would follow him and the way it would turn on him in accusation at his end. Jesus, using the word *a satan* was recognizing the dual nature of sin (our alienation from God) - the dividing from and the uniting against - that would eventually mean his death.

To say it another way, if sin is “separation from God,” Jesus on the mountain comes to realize the dual shape that this separation takes for us. And more than that, **Jesus comes to see himself and his call clearly against the backdrop of those separating forces.** It’s a moment of realization in which Jesus has both deciphered the dual shape of human sinfulness, and fully discerned and embraced the baptismal calling of his life. For, even calling sin by both its names, in full knowledge that each would be a tool of his destruction, he leaves the wilderness anyway, and starts proclaiming not the kingdoms of the world nor their splendor, but that the kingdom of heaven coming near.

Could the kingdom of heaven itself be a state in which people recognize their desire to “divide from” and “unite against”, and choose another way? What sort of kingdom would grow out of that kind of recognition, I wonder.

What I want you to hear, even more than the “dual nature of human sin” is this piece about vocation. For Jesus, it’s a realization of his “God-centeredness” And that’s what we must realize too. This God-centeredness is not only his identity, it’s our identity. This God-centeredness is not only his call, it is our call.

We heard that story today of Adam and Eve eating the apple, but we didn't hear the story that comes just before it, when God creates humankind in God's image and likeness. Could this be our call, our central call? To live ever more fully into that image and likeness?

If it is, that's one tall order. But we have good news. We have Jesus, who fresh from the wilderness walks with us right into our wilderness, leading the way, guiding our steps and teaching us to reflect the image and likeness of our creator that he shares with us. For on that mountain, he has taken up his truest identity as The God of powerless love.

AMEN