

The First 40 Days  
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On this First Sunday in Lent, we find ourselves in the wilderness with Jesus and the devil having a theological sparring match. To put this passage into context, Matthew Chapter 3 ends with God declaring that Jesus is God's own beloved Son and God is well pleased with him right after he gets baptized. Matthew then relates, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." [1]

When we break up scripture each week in the Lectionary, we miss out on transitions and how the Gospel writers are telling Jesus' life story by story. Jesus has no time at all to settle into this knowledge that he is God's Son, God loves him, and God is well pleased with him. Instead, Jesus immediately gets led by the Spirit into the wilderness to face temptation by the Devil and to fast for 40 days and 40 nights.

It's a make or break moment for Jesus. It's his first test in office if you will. It's common for us to judge presidents by their first 100 days in office. In the first 100 days, we can often observe their leadership style and what legislation they will champion. It was Franklin Roosevelt who set a high standard for modern presidents when he launched many New Deal reforms in his first three months as president. Ronald Reagan tackled the economy and his first 100 days was noted for someone trying to assassinate him. George H. W. Bush and Barack Obama actually had a common leadership strategy as both used campaign-style rallies to pitch their ideas throughout the country and both had high approval ratings. Bill Clinton showed he was interested in policy, especially health care, in his first 100 days in office--Clinton also didn't cooperate with Congress very well. George W. Bush showed a tough-mindedness and forceful leadership style especially when it came to foreign diplomacy. President Obama's first 100 days included a large economic stimulus bill, meeting with adversaries, and sending more troops into Afghanistan. The first 100 days in office has remained an important benchmark for the American public to assess a new President. [2]

So how does Jesus do in his first 40 days as the acknowledged, named and claimed, beloved Son of God? This is the story Matthew tells us today and the story revolves around three temptations.

In the First Temptation, the devil goes for the jugular. The tempter says, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." [3] The point is to prey on his weakened physical state and put some doubt into Jesus' mind. Remember Jesus just heard for the first time that he is God's Son. Now the tempter calls that holy moment into question, "If you are the Son of God." Lutheran Minister Nadia Bolz-Weber says that God's first move is always to name and claim us, but soon other people try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong. Bolz-Weber writes, "Capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school—they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation. . . So if God's first move is to give us our identity, then the devil's first move is to throw that identity into question." [4]

Jesus responds in this moment of gut-wrenching vulnerability, when the devil just called into question his very identity as God's Beloved Son, by quoting scripture: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." [5] He passed his first test in office by holding his head high and not doubting his value especially in the midst of his own insecurity and the devil trying to plant doubt. Jesus tells the tempter that he may be starving and alone, but he has God beside him. Bolz-Weber relates that our identity has nothing to do

with how others may perceive us, but it sure is tempting to believe that sometimes. And if Jesus himself got tempted, the rest of us are vulnerable too—tempted to “self-loathing or self-aggrandizement, depression or pride, self-destruction or self-indulgence.”[6]

The devil learns quickly, so in the Second Temptation he gets craftier. He again calls Jesus’ identity into question, “If you are the Son of God” and he quotes scripture right back at Jesus. It’s so frustrating when I hear Christians who know the Bible backwards and forwards use scripture as a weapon to wound or harm others. You hear this tactic especially when people argue against the full inclusion of the GLBT community or women in ministry or even historically, scripture was used to justify slavery. But I always take heart because a mentor once told me, “Lauren, even the devil can quote scripture.”

We see this today. The tempter takes Jesus to Jerusalem and places him at the highest point of the Temple. He tells Jesus to throw himself down for it’s written in scripture: “He will command his angels concerning you, and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”[7] This is a test of heroism and what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. Is he going to be the warrior king, the super hero who can leap from buildings and be saved at the last instant because he is God’s Son and the crowds will go wild and be stunned by his power? Or is he going to be a Messiah folks never imagined, the Son of God who will suffer and die on a cross? Jesus says, “Again, it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”[8]

Jesus passed the second temptation by seeing through the devil’s little game about testing God. Jesus doesn’t teach or heal to make a spectacle or prove that he really is Emmanuel, God with Us. Instead he works his wonders to meet peoples’ needs and he works in those intimate, sacred places in our lives. Perhaps he even began to realize that he wasn’t going to be the superhero Messiah many sought and that constantly proving himself to his detractors would only weigh him down.

The Third Temptation shows the devil holding nothing back, taking Jesus to a high mountain to unveil all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. This time the tempter doesn’t question Jesus’ identity and he doesn’t quote scripture, he just makes a power play. “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”[9] Think of how easily Jesus could have justified accepting this offer. If Jesus right then and there ruled all the kingdoms of the world, he would have ruled justly and shown mercy. He could have set things right and made things better. But where would his power have come from? And even though Jesus was so good to his core, could he have ruled justly if he had to bow down to Satan in order to gain power?

There are many times in epic books and movies that the hero is faced with a difficult choice of good vs. evil or if it’s possible to use something evil for good. Think of Star Wars and Luke Skywalker getting taunted and encouraged by the Emperor and his own father, Darth Vader, to use the Dark Side of the Force because there is power there. But the Dark Side uses fear, anger, jealousy, and hate and the Jedi use the Force for peace and to be compassionate and selfless. Luke refuses to turn to the Dark Side and ends up bringing his father back to his true self as he avoids the temptation to use evil for good.

In The Lord of the Rings, Frodo tries to give the one ring away to Gandalf the wizard, Galadriel the elf, and Aragorn the future King. And all of them have to resist the temptation, realizing that the ring corrupts and cannot be used for good no matter how good the person wielding the ring may be. In these fictional worlds, the heroes could easily justify using immoral means or methods to achieve a good and worthy purpose. But the characters have to stare down temptation and choose to stay in the light. Once you go down the path of the Dark Side or try to use the ring’s power, especially if you justify your decision and argue that you are only using

evil to bring about good in the world, it's devastatingly hard to return from that path. These examples from science fiction and fantasy bring home the reality that power corrupts.

So when we travel back to the wilderness with Jesus battling the devil and the tempter has this last temptation dangling in front of Jesus to rule over all the kingdoms of the world if only he were to fall down and worship him, we see Jesus resist right away. He sees through the ruse and has his strongest reaction yet, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"[10] Finally the devil leaves Jesus alone and then the angels come and wait on him. And it's about time.

This is one of those stories that can be hard to fathom, but it can make us consider epic battles of good vs. evil we know from literature and film and even world history. Was Jesus actually out there in the wilderness having a theological sparring match with Satan and overcoming the temptations of satisfying his bodily need for sustenance, proving himself to be the Son of God that God could save from death, and overcoming the test of ruling the kingdoms of the world by worshipping Satan and not God? I don't know.

I don't know. Maybe I should have started with this story likely being metaphorical but it's still true. Because what I do know for certain is that just like Jesus in the wilderness in our story, we can be tempted to doubt that we have value and that God has already named us and claimed us as God's own and we shouldn't listen to how others may perceive us. I know that we are prone to have soul-numbing doubts at the exact moment when we feel most vulnerable and tested or facing down some obstacle that seems all-consuming and makes us feel hopeless. I know we are prone to doubt and to turn away from the comfort God provides because we feel insecure about our relationship with God and with one another. I know that, like Jesus' story, angels in some form or another are standing by in the wings ready to come and wait on us. But sometimes we have to say, "Away with you, Satan!" first to let hope back into our lives. These first 40 days of Jesus' ministry may have some lingering lessons for us after all. Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] Matthew 4:1, NRSV.

[2] Adam Ross, "Judging Presidents in 100 Days," in The Washington Post, April 28, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/28/AR2009042802845.html>

[3] Matthew 4:3, NRSV.

[4] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, 139.

[5] Matthew 4:4, NRSV.

[6] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, 139.

[7] Matthew 4:6, NRSV.

[8] Matthew 4:7, NRSV.

[9] Matthew 4:9, NRSV.

[10] Matthew 4:10, NRSV.