

Year C Lent 1 Choose Your Story Luke 4 1 to 13

During Lent, we tend to focus on being repentant, strengthening our will to resist temptation, engaging in practices to draw closer to God, and we remember and relive the final events of Jesus' life that led him to his death on the cross. All of this is meant to help us live lives according to God's ways in God's kingdom.

Luke tells us today that the life in Christ that we strive for during Lent is only made possible through relationship with God. Today we hear two competing stories – the story of salvation in God and the story presented to us through the words of the devil. God's story and the world's story – the two competing stories that confront us every single day of our lives. These are the stories we are free to choose to live, moment after moment as we go through each and every day.

God's story will lead to life. The world's story leads to having things that the world values which don't amount to much in the end and keep us from right relationship with God. We must, however, be familiar with God's story in order, like Jesus today, to recognize and refuse the story the world presents to us.

The story of the temptations takes place in two significant locations: the wilderness and Jerusalem. In the bible, "the wilderness was the place where God met the Jewish people at Sinai after rescuing them from Egypt." In the wilderness God shapes the Israelites into his covenant people living according to his ways of love and compassion for all. God is near to them in the wilderness. They are cared for and led by God with cloud and fire. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is also led, this time by the Holy Spirit, in the wilderness, and he faces temptation by his adversary, the devil. The location of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness reminds us of the narrative of God's rescue of Israel. As with the Israelites, Jesus' time in

the wilderness is a time of being shaped by God, of being near to God despite the harshness of the reality around him – something that we can relate to as we live among the brokenness of the world (adapted from workingpreacher.org, Ruth Anne Reese). Knowing God's story enables Jesus, and will enable us, to remain firmly in relationship with God.

The other location of the temptation story is Jerusalem, the City of David, the center of power, identity, and worship for the Jewish people. The Roman occupiers of Israel had also made Jerusalem their centre of power. This is the site of the magnificent rebuilt Temple and the site of Herod's palace. Jerusalem should be a perfected hub of God's kingdom but, we know from elsewhere in the Gospels that it had become corrupted by the worldly lust for money and power. It is the site of Jesus' final temptation.

Along with two significant, competing locations, we have two significant, competing characters: Jesus, the Son of God and the devil. This is our first encounter with the devil in Luke's Gospel and, in it, we learn that the devil is bold, cunning, and clever. He knows the Scriptures really well and makes use of them in his arguments to tempt Jesus. We also learn that the devil is powerful. It is very interesting to note how the devil has gained so much power. As the devil points out all the kingdoms of the world he says to Jesus, "all of their worldly glory and authority has been given over to me." Really? Who handed over the kingdoms of the world to the devil? It certainly wasn't God. You know who that leaves, right? Humans. Humans who had turned away from the way of life in God's kingdom.

Jesus is the one sent to take these kingdoms out from under the thumb of the devil, to redeem the earth and those wayward humans who handed it over in the

first place but...he doesn't do it here. Although Jesus answers well and passes every test the devil throws at him, it is the devil who orchestrates this encounter. The devil begins the testing. The devil ends the testing. The devil chooses to leave for the time being. Jesus does not defeat the devil in this encounter. The devil will be back at an opportune time, we are told. God's story and the devil's story are both still out there, vying for our attention and affection.

What are the two stories lying before us? "The devil offers a storyline of self-reliance and indulgence (make yourself bread from stones), self-glorification (all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me), and displays of self-importance (if you are the son of God cast yourself from the top of the temple). Meanwhile, Jesus responds with quotations drawn from the Old Testament that show awareness of the true source of life and identity (he knows that life is more than food). He shows us his reliance is on God (the one worthy of true worship and service), and he shows us his understanding of God's character (it is not one to be tested). Jesus' responses are rooted in God's story – the story that tells us we are dependent on God, not ourselves, for life, glory, and identity" (adapted from workingpreacher.org, Ruth Anne Reese).

The devil tempts Jesus and us to follow his story by preying on our fears and doubts. We all forge identities for ourselves and label ourselves according to that identity...mother, wife, grandfather, friend, provider, teacher, care giver, and so on. These identities of ours are, in reality, quite fragile. We lose our job and we are no longer "provider." When my brother died, I was no longer "sister." Our identities that we assign to ourselves are subject to the changing tides of a broken world in which there is sickness, death, and economic instability. This causes our

fear and doubt along with the grief and loss, tragedies, and hardships we inevitably face in our lives.

The devil's temptations are aimed directly at the heart of Jesus' identity. *If you are the Son of God*, he taunts Jesus, then prove it with the miracle of turning these stones into bread. *If you are the Son of God*, then prove it by causing the angels to jump to your rescue. But Jesus does not need to prove his identity. In the three chapters leading up to today's Gospel story, we have heard over and over again that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. We heard it from the angel announcing the birth of Jesus to Mary; from Elizabeth whose child leapt in her womb at the presence of the unborn Messiah; from Simeon and Anna in the Temple; from John the Baptist at the River Jordan; and from the voice of God himself at Jesus' baptism right before these temptations. Jesus is the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. Unlike our identities that are based on life in a broken world, *his* identity will *never* change. Jesus' identity is rooted in his relationship with God and in his life in God's kingdom. Nothing will ever change the fact that he is God's Son. Nothing will change the fact that he is the world's Redeemer. His identity is solid.

But we have a solid identity too. We have an identity that will never change. We became children of God in our baptism. We were marked with the sign of the cross, marked as Christ's own *forever*. We have an identity rooted in our relationship with God, an identity not based on the changing tides of brokenness.

In the early church, those preparing for baptism spent three years preparing for baptism – three years of hearing the stories, talking about the stories, and watching and learning from other Christians who were living into those stories.

Early Christians knew God's Story of Salvation. They were excited, passionate, filled with hope because they knew our story, they knew their identity as rooted in God. That was lost over the centuries by many Christians. We often don't crack open a bible on our own outside of the church service and maybe during the Advent and Lent or Easter bible studies offered each year. Perhaps the saying, "A little bit of knowledge is dangerous" has some truth to it. People think they know what Scripture says and means but without the greater context of knowledge of the whole, we often get things wrong...like thinking women should cover their heads and say nothing in church. And the popular quotation, "God helps those who help themselves" is not a proverb in the bible – it is not in the bible at all. Self-reliance is a stance Jesus denies today...God provides, he tells the devil. Not knowing our story leaves us vulnerable to being sucked in by the world's story. We do get sucked in and we are often unaware that we have been sucked in.

In his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K.A. Smith drives home this point as he gives his readers a tour of what he calls, "one of the most important religious sites in our metropolitan area." He invites his readers to "notice the sheer popularity of the site as indicated by the colorful sea of parking that surrounds the building. The site is throbbing with pilgrims every day of the week as thousands and thousands make the pilgrimage." We enter through a grand archway to walk on marble floors. The walls are covered with colourful icons depicting the good life we can expect when we frequent this place. The high ceilings with their multitude of windows bathe the place in sunshine and draw our gaze upwards, away from the mundane world outside. The colours and décor of the space will change to guide us through the liturgical seasons of the year. Sometimes we come as seekers, not knowing exactly what we want but knowing we have a need to fill.

“At other times, our worship is intentional, directed, and resolute: ...knowing exactly why we’re here, in search of exactly what we need.” In this place, we give and we receive, and then we are released with a benediction for continued happiness (pp.19-23). This magnificent cathedral is, of course, the local shopping mall.

We live lives of consumption, living by the world’s story that money buys happiness even though we know that it does not. Like Jesus today, we are faced with the choice of self-reliance, self-glorification, and self-serving displays of our own importance. Jesus knows who he is and he has no interest in using his position as Son of God to gain any of these things that will never – can never – bring true love, peace, and joy. He knows the self-reliance, self-glorification, and self-serving that comes with the accumulation of the world’s wealth and power must be rejected in favour of God’s story of steadfast love and care, a story of every need fulfilled and of life moving unwaveringly toward the wholeness of all things. Like Jesus, you know who you are – you are a child of God. Choose your story.