

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is understandable, since the verses before the Gospel lesson for today describe how the Holy Spirit comes to Jesus at his baptism, and affirms his identity, confirms the foundation of his selfhood, his personhood. The Holy Spirit says, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” This is who Jesus is.

So, identity, selfhood, who we are. All of us have many things that make us who we are. For example, I am a father, I am a son, I am a husband, I am a friend. I am an American. I am European American. I am a pastor. All these things are a part of my identity, who I am. You might be a daughter, a sister, a mother, a friend. You might be Asian American or African American. You might be a business person or a teacher or a doctor or a nurse. All of these things make us who we are.

But what lies at the core of our identity? What forms the foundation of who we are? Well, in a way similar to that in which the Holy Spirit came to Jesus at his baptism, so also the Holy Spirit comes to us in our Baptism and says, “You are my child, whom I love. Everything else draws its greatest power from that reality.”

Not surprising that Jesus would be filled with the Holy Spirit. So, sometimes when people are filled with the Holy Spirit, they experience ecstatic states of joy. They might dance in the aisle of the church. They might speak in tongues, make sounds no one else can understand. Then, sometimes, people will interpret those sounds, again by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a fine way to worship.

In the Lutheran tradition, we understand the Holy Spirit to speak as we engage Scripture. So, we have a long and deep tradition of Biblical scholarship. We learn the languages of the Bible and the history of what was going on at the time when the Bible was written. We engage in conversation over Scripture and explore what Scripture means for us in our particular situations. That is another way to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus may well have experienced ecstatic joy and danced and spoken in tongues. But it doesn't say he does here. He may well have studied Scripture closely and examined the languages and the history. But it doesn't say he does here. What does the Holy Spirit do with Jesus here in the Gospel lesson for today?

It leads him into the wilderness.

Now, the wilderness was a dangerous place in Jesus' time. There were wild animals in the wilderness that might hurt you. There were bandits in the wilderness that might rob you and kill you. There were demons in the wilderness that might possess you. But the wilderness is also the place where you meet God. When God brings the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, where does God lead them? Into the wilderness. And it is in the wilderness that God gives them the Ten Commandments, the Law, the instruction, the gift which makes it possible to live in peace and community.

Likewise, we may or may not speak in tongues. We may or may not study Scripture closely. But the Holy Spirit will lead us into the wilderness. The Spirit will lead us into places where we don't know the right way to go except maybe the next step, the next day, the next fifteen minutes. The Spirit will lead us into places where we do not feel safe, where it is uncomfortable, unfamiliar, unknown. Because that's where we grow.

Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. And the devil comes to Jesus in the wilderness.

The devil says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread." Notice the devil's "If." God has said that Jesus is God's Son. This is Jesus's identity. But the devil questions Jesus's identity. "If you are the Son of God."

So also the devil questions our identity, our selfhood, our dignity, our deepest being. “If you were a child of God, you would be able to put bread on the table without worrying. If those people over there were really children of God, they would be able to earn enough to feed their families. But they can’t put bread on the table. So, clearly, they’re not children of God. Maybe they’re not even human.

“If you were a child of God, you could provide for yourself and your family without help from anyone. If you were a child of God, you would have no financial troubles, no worries. But you have worries, don’t you. So, clearly, you’re not.

See how the devil works? This is the devil’s “If.”

Jesus says, “It is written, “A person shall not live by bread alone.”

In other words, there is more to life, more to being human, more to us, than just coming up with bread.

Now, providing for ourselves and our families is a beautiful, holy, precious, powerful, glorious thing. It is a deeply good thing. But it is not what makes us who we are. It is not the core of our identity or the center of our self-worth. God’s word is. God says, “You are my child, beloved.”

There is greater mystery and wonder and hope and life than just earning a living, and that mystery and hope and wonder, that’s who we are.

The devil takes Jesus to a high mountain, and in an instant shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus sees Washington D.C. with the Washington monument and the Lincoln Memorial and the House of Congress. He sees the Taj Mahal in India and the Eiffel Tower in Paris. He sees Mt. Fuji in Japan, with its exquisite temples around, and Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. He sees the spectacular dances of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. He sees the ancient city of Machu Pichu in the Andes Mountains of Peru, and the holy folksongs of villagers in the hills of Mexico. He sees it all. And it is glorious. Really.

The devil says, “If.” “You can have authority over it all, IF you worship me. If you turn your back on who you are. If you turn your back on the God who loves you, you can have authority, power over it all. You can own it, if you do things my way; if you exercise power according to my principals, if you use your military power to

serve yourself and your cronies, you use financial power to serve yourself and the people who are like you; if you use the power of your status in society to serve yourself and the people you enjoy, you use your sexual power for your own pleasure and control, you use your spiritual power in such a way that it all serves you. If you do this, you will have power over all these things, you will win.”

You don't find power by doing it the devil's way. You don't win. Not really.

Rather, military power finds its greatest strength when it serves the God who loves you, and every other human being on this planet. Financial power finds its greatest value when it serves God, who provides for us, and every other human being on this planet. Social power finds its greatest honor when it serves God, who pays attention to you and every other person in the world. Sexual power finds its greatest intimacy and passion when it serves God, who loves you and your beloved and every other human being. Spiritual power finds its greatest mystery and wonder when it serves God, who surrounds and fills you and every atom of creation.

Jesus says, “You will worship the Lord your God and him only will you serve.”

The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, says, “If you are the Son of God.” Again if, when God has already established Jesus's identity and our identity. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. The angels will catch you, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

Devil says to us, “If you were a child of God, bad things would not happen to you. You would not have that painful medical condition that hampers your movements. You would not have that painful mental condition that hampers your thinking. You would not have that trouble in your family that breaks your heart. You would have more friends. You would have better grades, a happier life, if you were really a child of God. But clearly you're not.”

Remember that voice. Understand. That's the voice of the devil, the voice of Satan.

Jesus says, “You will not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In other words, God is not a vending machine, where you put the right stuff in and you get what you want out. You put the right amount of money in a vending machine, you get your candy bar out. You can test that. See if it works.

But you can't test God. God is not a vending machine, where you put money in and you get more money out, you put good deeds in and you get happiness out, not even where you put the right beliefs in, put in intellectual assent to the proper doctrinal statements and you get eternal life in heaven out. That's not how God works.

God is a person, who loves us. And love does not depend on testing. Love depends on trust and trustworthiness. Do you test your friends? No, you don't. Do you test your spouse or your beloved? No, you don't. If you do, things will go badly very soon. What do you do? You trust, and you are trustworthy. That's how you have a healthy relationship. That's how you build love.

We trust God, that in both the times when things are going well, and in the really hard times, God is still with us. God still loves us, always.

The devil leaves Jesus till a more opportune time. We'll talk about that another day.

The devil leaves us. Comes back to us again, sometimes. But the Holy spirit never leaves us. We are always, always God's children. God always love us. That's who we are.