

Luke 4:1-13 1 Lent 3.9.25 Bill Uetracht

You can't be alive in the 2020s and not be aware of *identity theft*. There are some bad folks out there who want your personal or financial information so that they can use it for their own fraudulent purposes. They want to become you and tap into your resources. It's one of the biggest criminal activities of our time, something many of you have fallen victim to.

David Lose suggests that *identity theft* is the real issue of the temptation text from Luke. A lot of times when we think of temptation, we focus on morality—giving into some naughty thing that we think that we shouldn't do. You know, I have committed myself to fasting from Brussel sprouts for Lent, and I am tempted to violate my fast.

For many of us, temptation is about the avoidance of moral impurity. And while I am not at all advocating moral impurity, I suspect that Biblically temptation is much deeper than not making naughty choices. The biggest temptation of all is not eating too many fudge brownies, cussing like a sailor, engaging in sexual no-nos. The biggest temptation is giving in to identity theft.

Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. In Mark, he was cast into the wilderness; the Spirit pushed him into it. Luke is a little softer. Jesus after he got there was directed by the Spirit.

By the way, the wilderness is where all heroes go. If your heroes haven't gone into the wilderness, haven't spent time in a dry place, haven't faced loneliness, haven't struggled with unanswered questions about life and themselves, you probably ought to not make them your heroes. Trust me. Many supposed heroes will do all

they can to avoid the wilderness. They would just rather live in the land where they remain the captains, where theirs is the only voice they have to listen to, where they have no doubts about faith or their opinions. True heroes, though, are tested; they are refined. They spend time in the wilderness.

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, a long enough time to get the job done. And if you are the least bit Biblically savvy, you will remember that the people of Israel spent forty years in the desert, also a long enough time to get the job done. Jesus is redoing what the Israelites did. All heroes and all good nations do what the Israelites do; they go into the wilderness, which is why we are going into the wilderness for forty days in this season of Lent.

Now, while Jesus is in the wilderness, according to Luke, he meets up with the devil. Honestly, you need to be prepared to meet the devil when you are in the wilderness. Oh, by that I don't mean you are going to run into a little guy with a pitchfork who, again, will want to lead you into all naughtiness. No, what I mean is that in the wilderness you will encounter the forces that so long to encourage you to trust that you aren't who you really are, to confuse you as to what it really means to be you.

Notice that when the devil offers two of the temptations, he starts with these words: "*If you are the son of God.*" *If this is who you are, then . . .*" The devil is messing with Jesus' identity. So, you are the Son of God, then turn this stone into a loaf of bread. So, you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from here.

"Son of God" is what Jesus was said to be when he was baptized. Luke tells us that after Jesus was baptized a voice came

from heaven and said: “You are my Son, the beloved.” This is Jesus’ deepest identity.

Well, what does it mean to be the beloved Son of God? This is the question the temptation story struggles with. The devil’s got an idea, an idea that represents a *theft* of Jesus’ true identity. If you are the Son of God, make life about economic power. Turn a rock into bread. If you are the Son of God, make life about political power. You can have all the kingdoms of the world, if you just bow down and worship me. *If* you are the Son of God, make life about religious power. Climb with me to the pinnacle of the temple and jump off it. Do some spectacular, miraculous feat. Wow the people! After all, didn’t God say that he would not let your foot be dashed against a stone?

The temptation story is all about identity, about who Jesus is. And the devil wants to steal Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God for his own purposes--purposes, the Bible would have us know, that are not the purposes of God. Life for Jesus isn’t meant to be about economic power, political control, or religious theater. Who Jesus is as the Son of God is much more authentic, more down-to-earth, more connected to human suffering, more about faithfulness, not success, more about the deep connection to God and God’s provision, not the provision that flows from the kingdoms of this world.

The biggest temptations we face in life have to do with our identity. Are we going to be who we are? Is our status as sons and daughters of God enough for us? Is there an enough-ness about us that will assist us as we manage the vicissitudes, the ups and downs of life? Can we deal with life on the basis of our rudimentary trust in

God or our status given by God, or will we have to add onto it, maybe by securing power and control? “Are we enough?” is the question.

I bet that most of you realize that the role of a significant amount of advertising in our time is to make us think that we are not enough. Many ads want us to develop a deep sense of inadequacy, so that the products they are highlighting sell. They want to help steal our identity so that we say, “I’m not enough!” Maybe I will be enough if I get a new car, if I get that credit card, if I get the clothes I want, if I finally go on the cruise. The never-ending need to buy and collect sometimes is rooted in our desire to be enough. And that desire often is about more, more, more, because we never can be enough.

Young girls these days, Jonathan Hait tells us in his book **The Anxious Generation**, are exhibiting a growing amount of anxiety and depression because they are led to believe that they are not enough. Fed by exposure to too much social media, they obsess over their looks and their size. They compare their family life to what they perceive as the perfect family life of their friends. And theirs is never enough.

Politicians of our days often thrive on the never-enough message. Knowing that fear sells, they utilize fear to fuel our insecurities, our never-enoughness. Fear is a wonderful way to rally the troops. Insecurity is a seedbed for the obsessive need for power of all kinds. The insecure will do all they can to get power.

Now don’t get me wrong. I think we need people in power. And I am grateful for those who want to be in positions of power. We need presidents, pastors, popes, mayors, and heads of corporations. The world doesn’t do well without leaders. But the question for me is if

that power is necessary for a sense of enough-ness. Do I have to control in order to feel that I have status? Or is my leadership simply about doing the job I have been given and serving those in need? Faithful, servant leaders trust their status as beloved children of God. They don't need to be more. They don't need to give in to the devil who wants to steal their identity. And note, Jesus reveals that kind of leadership. He wouldn't let the devil steal his identity. He, unlike Israel, unlike most folks, lived on the basis of trust in the God who named him "the beloved Son."

This past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, creative and humorous thinker Anne Lamott shared a story about a recent shopping trip she made with a friend who was in a wheelchair and who was just told that she was going to die in a couple of weeks. Anne was trying on a new skirt that maybe was just a little tighter and shorter than she was used to wearing. Anne said to her friend, "Tell me; does this skirt make my hips look big?"

The dying friend responded: "You don't have time for that." I read that as: "You don't have time for such a silly preoccupation." Dying people often get that we don't have time to be other than what we really are. My sense is that the devil seldom shows up to dying people, begging them to be something that they are not.

Ash Wednesday just reminded us that we are all dying people. It just slapped some ashes on our faces and said, "The gig is up. You are going to die. I, God, hold your identity. Tell that silly devil that you do not belong to him. You are a beloved child of God. And that is more than enough."