

Liar, Liar

Scripture: Psalm 91, Luke 4:1-13

1st Sunday in Lent

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Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 9Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Proclamation of the Word

If you go to Orlando for a Disney vacation and run out of things to see and do, you can venture across town and go to the theme park, "The Holy Land Experience." At the Holy Land theme park in one day, you can go into the great Temple in Jerusalem and the caves of Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. In the real Israel these two great holy sites are a long dusty bus ride through the desert from Jerusalem. At the Holy Land Experience Theme Park, you can go from the Wailing Wall of the Temple to the Caves of Qumran in about Three minutes. You can enjoy all the sacred sites of the faith with none of the hassles for a mere \$31 for adults and \$16 for children. You don't have to worry about gun carrying soldiers at check point or any of the tensions between Palestinians and Israelis. Everyone is happy at the Holy Land Experience. And if you get hungry, no need to turn stones into bread, you can buy a Goliath Burger for \$5.95- that's pretty good for theme park food prices!

The man-made theme park seeks to be accurate, and it even has camel hoof prints cast into the sidewalks. It's so real it's unreal. My friend last week was saying that they have been to Disney's Epcot so much that once someone asked if she had been to Japan and she said, "Yes!" then caught herself. You might even think you've been to the places where Jesus walked after a visit to this theme park, but think again.

A Holy Land theme park sanitizes the real place.
There is strife and struggle there in the real Holy Land. It has been that way for thousands of years.

Many of you have witnessed this in your lifetime since 1948 when the state of Israel was created.

Our last church had an event where a photographer had walked to Bethlehem, a pilgrimage of faith.

His photos told a dark and difficult story.

Razor wire crisscrossed this land where Jesus walked.

Palestinian homes were being knocked down to build walls and claim land for Israel.

A Muslim, Palestinian woman spoke up at the end of the slideshow in the basement of the church. She asked,

“Why do Christians who follow Jesus allow this to happen?”

Such darkness and danger exists in so many lives.

Too often we want to clean it up, make it Hollywood pretty and tell a different story as the Holy Land Experience does. Our Presbyterian Women’s circles studying Joshua are wrestling with this issue, I’m sure.

But today’s passage will not let us escape the difficult realities.

As pastor Joanna Adams writes, “If we remove the darkness and danger and leave only the comfort and encouragement of faith in Jesus, we miss the substance of the story.”¹

Lent is the season in the church which won’t let us ignore or deny the difficulties.

Jesus finds himself in the wilderness being tested by the devil.

So many find themselves in the wilderness.

I already mentioned the Israel/Palestine conflict.

We think of Haitians traumatized and seeking to rebuild a life with little resources, but some with faith larger than the need.

Children, men and women are terrorized regularly in the Congo where lawless drug lords are executing their own war of terror. Children are mutilated, raped, and tortured; yet, the world has not had their attentive eye on this desperate part of Africa.

So many find themselves in the Wilderness being tested.

I posted this on Facebook this week. “Laura is wondering what has tested your faith...”

I received several folks who stated that unemployment was their biggest test right now.

One college friend said that the years of trying to have a child were a huge test for her and her husband.

My missionary friend, Bob, replied, the near death of our oldest daughter at 18 months from cerebral malignant malaria while they lived in Congo.

She convulsed for 8 hours and lived thanks to excellent doctors serving there.

Another said the untimely death of a loved one then said she remembers not to “whine” when she reads what Jesus endured.

The wilderness can be a dangerous place.
It is where we begin our journey through Lent.
But even in the wilderness one might find life.

In the journey of faith throughout the Bible, "Wilderness was the wild place, the waiting place, the place of preparation. It also connected then, as it does now, to very basic spirituality: a place to grapple with God, a place to learn dependence on nature and its provisions, a place of extremes or contrasts, of wild beasts and desert. It is the Lenten space par excellence."²

But Jesus was not there in the wilderness alone.
Having been baptized with water and the Holy Spirit,
It was the Holy Spirit that went with Jesus into the
wilderness.

Luke's gospel states that *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.* The Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness and did not leave him alone.
Jesus met the devil, but was never alone.

Now the devil has its own mythology which surrounds him.
The name conjures up a little red man with horns, but the devil is that power which opposes God's intention. Maybe you have seen the movie, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. It just launched this week. The book is about the greek gods and their offspring, the demi gods. In the movie there is a computer animated version of Hades, the greek god. Seeing this on screen, one can see where we have accommodated this image of a fiery, burning underworld into the bible image of the devil. But the bible never describes the devil exactly like that. Another name for the devil in the Bible is Satan. This word means "the deceiver". In other words, the devil is a liar!
And he tries his lies out on Jesus.

Jesus is at his hungriest, loneliest and most vulnerable- forty days is a long time without food, good sleep, or good company.
It is when Jesus is vulnerable that the devil speaks his lies.
He tries to test Jesus' faithfulness to God.

The devil, Satan, or the powers and principalities which Paul uses in the Bible all are words used to describe

Powers which oppose God.

Those powers are among us, in us and around us.

Anything which opposes love, health, wholeness and peace are those powers of opposition to God's intentions for the world.

And it is at Jesus' lowest point that the testing comes.

Isn't that how it works. We can trace the horrible, tragic situation in the Congo, for instance, to a people left vulnerable and afraid.

Some seize power through violence, exercise greed, and harm innocent people.

Others are paralyzed by fear and become victims.

Even as I have been reading about the situation there, I shudder and close my eyes in disgust. Evil is real. Hell on earth.

So what is that brings Jesus through the testing and temptation?
How was he able to endure?

Jesus does indeed fight back.

He does not violate or harm anyone, but he fights back.

He has been saturated with the word of God all his life.

And now it becomes his shield and his fortress.

In Psalm 91 which we read today,

God is the fortress and the refuge.

In that way God's word becomes Jesus' first line of defense.

He comes back with every test with Scripture. Jesus knows who he is. He is God's Son, the chosen, and he will follow God's ways, not be tempted to give into the testing of a mere devil.

The devil distorts and misuses God's word. He twists it and uses it for his purposes. Again remember the word for Satan means "deceiver." He is trying to deceive and trick Jesus. For instance, he takes him to the pinnacle of the Temple. The devil quotes Psalm 91 which we read,

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus counters with Deuteronomy 6:16,

"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Jesus who has been claimed in his baptism and given a clear sense of who he is will not be deterred. Yes, he was hungry, suffering as any human would the pain, confusion, and loneliness of life in the wilderness. But he had exactly what he needed. He was led by the Spirit and girded up by the Word of God which had shaped and formed his being. It is the bread that sustains us as well.

In the wilderness where things become clearer.

It might just be the place of spiritual blessing and strength.

You realize that there are worse things than not getting what you want.

Losing your soul could be worse.

It might be the place where you discover that the Holy Spirit will give you everything you need for living faithfully. And hopefully it will be a place where lies are countered with God's truth.

When faced with lies, we rely on God's truth.

In a world which lies saying terror and death are always going to win.

Jesus counters, "This is true- For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him, will not perish, but have everlasting life."

In a world which lies saying we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction.

Jesus counters, "This is true- I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly."

In a world which lies saying we are victims of the powers of evil which seek to rule the world and claim it possesses all kingdoms,

Jesus says, "This is true- to me is given all authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

So let us in faith and trust believe that what he says is true even as we follow in his steps this season of Lent which leads us to the cross and resurrection!

- 1 Joanna Adams, "Stone to Bread," *Journal for Preachers Vol. XXXIII, No. 2* (Lent 2010), 15-16. Joanna uses the image of theme park which is by Adam Goodheart, "Theme Park on a Hill," *New York Times Magazine* (February 25, 2001) : 13-14.
- 2 William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary," Lent 1, Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia at <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkLent1.htm>