

## Let God Be God

Today's Gospel gives us a rare glimpse into the mystical world beyond our own. Right after Jesus's baptism, the Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness, where he fasts and prays for forty days and nights. That's a long time to be alone and hungry, even for the Son of God. By the end of this ordeal Jesus is famished, perhaps more vulnerable than he normally would be. It's then that the Adversary pops up, trying to tempt Jesus the way he so constantly tempts us.

The story of Jesus's temptation is recounted in varying levels of detail in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. It's an odd little tale, so different from the rest of the Gospels that it seems unlikely, at least to me, that someone would have thought to make it up. And there are no eyewitnesses to this conversation. The only person present is Jesus. This suggests to some Bible scholars that Jesus himself must have told his disciples what happened to him in the desert. They passed the story along, it became part of our Lord's oral history, and was eventually written into the Gospels. If you're ever challenged by a skeptic to prove that Jesus existed, point to this passage. Only Jesus could have told this story, which means he must have been around to tell it.

Our translation is a smidge off. It quotes the Adversary as saying, "*If you are the Son of God ...*," which questions Jesus's divine nature. The original Greek is closer to "*Since you are the Son of God ...*," which concedes Jesus's divinity. This seemingly small distinction matters because it clarifies what Jesus and the Adversary are each trying to accomplish. The Adversary isn't trying to figure out who Jesus is because he already recognizes him. His goal is sleazier than that. As Bible scholar John Yieh observes, the Adversary wants to goad Jesus into doing something disgraceful to tarnish his godliness. That, of course, Jesus absolutely refuses to do.

Some Bible scholars believe that God is testing Jesus here, or that Jesus is testing himself. If so, it's not much of a contest. The Adversary presents Jesus with three temptations

that Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen described as the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful. Turning stones into bread wouldn't just satisfy Jesus's immediate hunger – it would allow him to feed countless members of his community. Leaping off the Temple into the arms of angels would demonstrate his divine heritage to even the most skeptical observer. Worshipping the Adversary to gain control over the whole world would, presumably, give Jesus a clear path to correct all of humankind's blunders. But Jesus bats away all three of the Adversary's temptations with almost contemptuous ease. If God truly wanted to test Jesus, he should have found a worthier opponent.

This passage comes up on the first Sunday in Lent because of its focus on temptation. But the temptations that the Adversary places before Jesus aren't ones that we moderns usually find enticing. It's nice to be relevant, able to bring something useful to difficult situations. However, we're more likely to want to turn money into personal pleasures than to turn stones into bread. We might crave the attention that comes with being spectacular, but few of us are reckless enough to seek fame – and tempt God – by throwing ourselves off high places. And while we might wish for the power to change the world for the better, only a comic book villain would be foolish enough to want to rule over the complicated, unsightly mess that we've made of things. The relevance, spectacle and power that the Adversary uses to tempt Jesus are too much for mortal creatures. Instead of tempting us, they should scare us half to death.

Jesus already possesses relevance, spectacle and power in abundance. There's nothing the Adversary can offer that could possibly interest him. So, why does the Holy Spirit lead Jesus into this conversation? Bible scholar Douglas R. Hare observes that the three temptations placed before Jesus parallel the three temptations that undid Moses' people during the Exodus. Unlike Jesus, however, they complained constantly about hunger, repeatedly put God to the test and

worshipped idols instead of Adonai. Perhaps Matthew gives us this morning's passage to show that Jesus can resist temptation as we fallen folk cannot.

But to fully appreciate Jesus's triumph over the Adversary, we need to consider the deeper temptation beneath those apparently on offer: the temptation to doubt God's goodness or to try to be God. The wandering Hebrews yielded to temptation because they didn't trust Adonai to take care of them. They were always afraid that the food and water would run out or God would abandon them in the wilderness. Jesus, on the other hand, completely trusts God to meet his needs. Famished after his forty-day fast, he nonetheless waits for his Father's angels to feed him. He could take that swan dive off the Temple, but he refuses to test his beloved Father. And he could strike a bargain with the Adversary so he can put the world to rights, but he's confident that his Father will make everything new in the way they had agreed upon before his incarnation.

This story has much in common with our Lord's parables, further proof that we have it from Jesus himself. What is this tale intended to tell us? At least three things. First, Jesus shows us that the Adversary can be beaten, that the temptations he offers don't amount to much if we can resist him in the moment. Second, Jesus gives us a neat demonstration of how familiarity with Scripture can help us stand firm against the lies and clever rationalizations that the Adversary whispers in our ears, hoping we'll mistake them for our own ideas. Evil is sneaky; Scripture is not. Even when it's subject to interpretation, Scripture is pretty clear about what we should and shouldn't do to live a good life that's pleasing to God. Learning Scripture well enough to be able to argue successfully about it with a clever opponent is a great way to get its fundamental principles down.

And that takes us to what may be Jesus's primary point in this story. Trusting God really is the best way to live. When we try to play God, chasing fame, fortune and power with only

ourselves to rely on, we can make ourselves really miserable. When we decide that we can only be happy if life is just the way we want it every minute of every day, we set ourselves up for endless disappointment and frustration. But if we can bring ourselves to trust that God knows what we need and can be counted upon to come through for us, that frees us up to enjoy a life of praise and thanksgiving, which is an utter blessing.

As we gather for worship this morning, I'm well aware that many here, in person and online, have been going through some really painful times. It's hard to trust God in the face of illness, sorrow, loss, and grief. It's especially challenging when we have to watch the suffering of someone we love, or when a loved one is taken from us. I'm not suggesting for an instant that pain isn't real, or that anyone's anguish should be papered over with platitudes and false smiles. God is big enough to handle our anger when life hurts more than we can bear. If your life is hard enough right now that you're skeptical of God's goodness, it's okay. It's also okay to tell God exactly how you feel.

But Jesus knows, I think, that pain is more bearable if we can bring ourselves to trust God in spite of it, if we can recognize that no suffering lasts forever. Getting to that trust sometimes takes a leap of faith, a conscious decision to rely on God even when we're sorely tempted to fall back solely on our own resources. It's not always easy, but our Gospel passage this morning proves that it can be done.

In this Lenten season, it's good to contemplate how much we really believe that God is there for us, taking better care of us than we take of ourselves. Do we trust God to be God, or do we try to grab the reins from God whenever life gets tough? The Adversary, that Father of Lies, tells us that God is not to be trusted. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, tells us to trust God with all our hearts. Which of them should we believe? You tell me. *Amen.*