

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God; God alone shall you serve.’” ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

My Uncle John tells me that when he was in High School, almost every time before he would go out with friends or with his girlfriend, his mom (my Grandma) would say to him, just before he left the house, “Now, John, remember who you are.”

And he says that, as he would hear that line, he would get annoyed and think to himself, “I know who I am - a bored teenage boy!”

I remember having conversations with friends in High School as we were all getting ready to leave home for the first time for college - conversations about identity. We had all spent our last years forming these identities of who we were, and now we were leaving this. I remember feeling very uncertain how that would be for me, as I stepped away from some many things that seemed so fundamental to who I thought I was. Who would I be now that I was no longer a wrestler, no longer in choir? Who would I be apart from this group of friends I had spent so much time with the past 6 years? Who would I be without these core elements of my identity?

This story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, it is a story of identity. It is a story of Jesus considering who he is and who he will be. There in the wilderness, alone, hungry and weak - Jesus is faced with the questions of who he is and who he will be.

It seems like the questions of Jesus’ identity should be solved - they should be over and done with. Jesus has just come from his baptism, where everyone present had seen the sky break open, watched the dove descend and heard the voice from heaven introduce him as God’s Beloved Child. After something like that, it seems like questions of identity and direction are completed - clearly this is God’s chosen one who will do great things. After hearing a voice from the heavens, everyone, including Jesus might have thought, “this is going to be easy.” Maybe he would dawn a cap and some knee high boots and take out some bad-guys. Only that was not what happened. What happened was that he went from one spectacular moment of the heavens breaking

open to a long, lonely time in the wilderness. From a moment where he was perhaps full of strength and certainty of who he was, to a time of struggle and testing, during which he may have wondered if he had imagined that whole heavens-breaking-open thing. For forty days and forty nights there was no sign of God at all. The sky stayed shut. There were no doves. No voice from heaven spoken reassuring words. There was just him and the wilderness...and finally, the devil¹.

This is the story in which everyone finds out what being the child of God really means. This is a story about Jesus' identity. And it is a story about our identity.

This is what I didn't know when I left home for college that first time, that the work of identity does not just happen when you leave home - it is the work of a lifetime. To know who you are, whom to trust, whom to obey, how to hope, how to be in the world - this is the work of a lifetime.

If our identities were settled early on in life, then things like "23 and me" where you can get your full DNA profile or "ancestry.com", would not be such booming business. At the base of these family history searches is a quest to better understand who we are - that as we better grasp where we came from, we might better grasp who we are and where we might be going.

We continue to ask questions of identity throughout our lives:

- Who am I in this job?
- Who am I without children at home to take care of?
- If I retire, who am I without my work?
- Who am I know that I can't run the Race to Roby Creek anymore?
- As we heal, who am I without this pain; or without this anger?
- Who am I know that I have forgiven this hurt that I have had so long?
- Who am I with my parents no longer living?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor raises this concept in her sermon on this passage in her book of sermons,

-Who am I if I am now that my children have taken my car keys?

-Who am I now that I have lost my job?

-A question of identity my Grandma is asking as cancer slowly takes away pieces of who she was, “who am I if I don’t make the best chocolate chip cookies?”

-Who am I if I set down this question of faith for awhile?

-Who am I without my spouse?

-Who am I if I am not needed? Who am I without someone to listen to my wisdom?

I think it is clear that our identity is continually formed throughout our lifetime; something we continue to wrestle with, that is continually shaped.

And so Jesus, despite knowing that he is Beloved by God through the heavens opening up, now goes into the wilderness to keep wrestling with his own identity: of who he is and who he will be.

After forty days and nights of fasting - in his weakened and hungry state, the story tells us that temptations comes in the form of the devil. “If you are really God’s chosen, turn these stones into bread.” Who are you, who will you be? Will you be one who meets every need through the snap of a finger? Will you find your fulfillment by saying ‘yes’ to every person who has a need?

Next, the story continues, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and everyone will see that God has saved you!” Who are you, who will you be? Will you be one who gains followers through super-human acts of strength? Will you be one who does miracles to win favor and loyalty? Will you find your fulfillment in being able to do what no one else can do?

Finally, the devil leads Jesus to the highest mountain top from which he can see the known world. “I will give you all of these kingdoms if you bow down and worship me.” Who are you, who will you be? Will you be one who does whatever it takes to get political power, to sit on the throne of this world? Will you rule by being a king who sits at the top and dictates to all what they must do? Will you find your fulfillment through having others listen to you and attend to you?

After each offer, after each temptation, I can hear the voice of my Grandma whispering, “remember who you are.”

Now, I would have never got this/realized this on my own, but the Bible commentaries I read all told me that this scene should be recalling for us another story where the devil showed up to tempt humanity. Way back in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were given everything they needed to live in harmony with God and the Creation. And then came the tempter, in the form of a snake, telling them to eat of the fruit of the ‘Tree of Life.’ The temptation, to be like God. To forget who they are, the creation - the Beloved of God. And instead to try and be like God. As my Old Testament professor (Ben Ollenberger) used to say, we are all called to be like God, and the greatest sin is trying to be like God.

So Jesus has before him three excellent/reasonable offers:

1. Turn stones to bread. In a world of unbelievable hunger, why not?
2. Leap from the pinnacle of the temple. In a world so slow to change, why not a coercive shock into belief? Why not a quick way of proving his power and favor?
3. Enter the political arena. In a world of slavery, war, oppression, disregard for life and rights, why not? Why not rule from the top down, ordering people to listen and follow?

Despite most of these paintings I have shown, the scene before us is not a cartoon of Jesus debating some horned creature with a frightening face who smells of sulphur. Jesus is wrestling with his identity and the will of God for the work now before him. He is presented with three avenues. All three have immense possibilities for good. Because the devil is involved in these offers, it is easy to assume Jesus is rejecting all bad options here, when in reality, these were all routes in which he could have done much good in the world. They are only temptations if he truly could have chosen them, if he truly wrestled with how to use his power and ability.

And this is why it is important to recall that Adam and Eve story, for while they believed their great fulfillment would come through leaving their humanness - Jesus remembered who he was. A child of Israel. A child of God. Jesus sought his fulfillment through being fully human. His identity would not be found in rising above his humanness through great fame, wealth, or power. His identity would be found through the hard act of serving. Through the hard acts of loving. Through the hard acts of forgiving. Through the hard acts of standing up to the Powers of Domination and hatred and bitterness.

Each of these temptations asks Jesus to contradict his identity as a child and servant of the true God to whom he belongs. Each of these is an invitation to embrace an alternative identity that the world will celebrate, and to forget his true character. This is a story about Jesus' identity. And it is a story about our identity.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was just a twenty-seven year old pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, he had become the leader of the bus boycott there. A boycott of 50,000 people of color using the principles of nonviolence to, as King put it, "to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth." And in his reflections on the bus boycott, he describes a critical moment for himself – a time when he was not sure if he could overcome the fear and constant obstacles coming at him from many angles.

King was getting threats daily – phone calls threatening violence to him or his family. He writes, “Almost every day someone warned me that they had overheard white men making plans to get rid of me. Almost every night I went to bed faced with the uncertainty of the next moment.” One night toward the end of January he was unsettled by another of those phone calls threatening the lives of he and his family. King says, “I hung up, but I couldn’t sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.”

He got out of bed and began to walk the floor. He warmed himself up a cup of coffee and there, with that cup of coffee untouched in his hands, he says that he tried to think of a way to move out of the picture out of the leadership role without appearing a coward. Finally, he decided to take my problem to God. “With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’

Martin Luther King, Jr. recalls that right there at his kitchen table, in his exhaustion and fear, he experienced the presence of the Divine as he never had before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: *‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’* A message to carry on. A message of his own belovedness.

Just three nights after Martin Luther King, Jr. felt the presence of the Divine at his kitchen table – three nights after he heard that inner voice saying, *‘Stand up for righteousness and God will be at your side forever –* King’s house was bombed while he was at a meeting at the First Baptist church, while his wife and daughter were at home. His voice of God, God’s promise of presence - these did not keep away all fear, they did not keep away all pain.

We will never stop bumping up against questions of identity: of who we are, who to trust, of how to live in this moment. Whether we have heard the voice of God screaming from the heavens at our baptism, or we heard the whisper of God at our kitchen table in a time of great uncertainty - even then, we will have times of uncertainty - times when we will be tempted to forget our Belovedness; times when we will forget our common humanity; times we will want to give up in our fear or exhaustion; times we will want to turn our gaze away from the suffering of the world; times when we will want to turn to the easy tool of blame and hatred.

In those moments, hear the voice of your Grandmother calling to you, “remember who you are. Remember who you are.”

A Beloved child of God

Created in the image of God

Created with limitless potential

Part of a shared humanity

Called to serve, not to be served.

Called to love.

Through all that life brings, through the tears of pain and the tears of joy, remember who you are.