

Wilderness Testing

First Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, February 21, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Sometimes a memory stays dormant, just below our conscious minds. And then something prompts that memory to rise to the surface, years later. This happened to me while studying our Gospel lesson. When I turned 7, my father was in the process of moving our family and his dental practice from suburban Pittsburgh to the little town of Ridgway, PA, where I spent the rest of my youth. Not long before we moved, friends of my father and patients he had treated held a big going-away party at some watering hole in Pittsburgh, and there were people of all ages, including me, in attendance.

I don't know how it happened, but some little boy around my age must have been getting on my nerves at that party—maybe teasing me—I can't recall. We did not come to blows (I am not the violent type), but I distinctly remember that I rose up tall (it's difficult, but try to imagine that) and said to him clearly, and arrogantly I might add, something to the effect that my father was the guest of honor at this party. And that boy ought to watch what he says to me. 'Cause I'm the daughter of the guest of honor. "Oh, yeah?" "Yeah! So there!"

I also recall that boy's father and my father "breaking up our fight," pulling us aside, and scolding us. I know my father told me I did not have bragging rights nor could I demand and expect special treatment just because the party was for him. Being related to the guest of honor did not give me license to act the way I was acting. It was not the way he raised me. It was not what my father expected from me.

Now, why did this particular memory rise to the surface? I want you to look at the story Luke tells us—the story of these temptations the devil placed before Jesus—and understand that the devil couched these temptations within language that raised up Jesus' potential "bragging rights." The devil urged Jesus to consider taking certain actions **just because he was the Son of God**. The devil implied Jesus could demand and should expect special treatment **just because he was the Son of God**. The devil suggested that Jesus had license to act pretty much any way he wanted to act **just because he was the Son of God**,

Now, I know we hear the devil saying twice, "**If** you are the Son of God..." but the phrase ought to be translated like this: "**Since** you are the Son of God..." And anyone in Luke's congregation hearing his Gospel would have known that was true—Jesus was the Son of God. For Luke made clear Jesus' identity just one chapter earlier, at his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven boomed out: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

So by the time we hit chapter 4 here, there was no question about Jesus' identity. Today's lesson opens up, acknowledging that Baptismal moment of identification by reminding us that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit propelled him out into the wilderness. No, there was no doubt as to Jesus' identity, and the devil's taunts weren't suggesting any doubt. Jesus **was** the Son of God. The question the devil raised in his temptations was "What **kind** of Son of God will Jesus be?"

A 40-day fast. Most of us can scarcely muster strength to go on a one-day fast, much less forty. Certainly Jesus was hungry in the wilderness after 40 days. And the devil took that hunger, and took the hungry one's identity, and wove a test that also included Jesus' knowledge of God's saving acts for his chosen people in history. So, of course the Son of God, with the full power of the Holy Spirit and the aforementioned approval of God the Father, should be able to relieve his own hunger after 40 days, just as the Lord God did for those Israelites wandering in the wilderness 40 years. Back then, the Lord God made manna fall like rain to feed his people; so go ahead, Jesus, and turn one stone to bread to feed yourself today. You are, after all, related.

Then there was the temptation to possess authority and fame. Certainly Jesus wanted the world to notice him long enough to hear and receive his message. That's a different kind of hunger, I suppose. The devil took that desire to have such a wide-flung authority, and took Jesus' identity, and wove a test that made it seem like having that kind of influence over all people would only help Jesus in his mission. After all, if his message about the kingdom of God doesn't have a medium within which to be communicated, if Jesus has no opportunity to preach to ears that actually listen (if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it...), what earthly or heavenly good can Jesus, the Son of God, do? So go ahead, said the devil—just bow down and worship me, and I'll make certain you have an audience for your message. As the Son of God, you deserve that.

For the final test, the devil didn't hold back. He let loose a barrage of temptation, this time using Holy Scripture to press his advantage. This time Luke tells how Jesus was transported to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, and the devil baited Jesus by drawing upon Jesus' trust of God the Father—the kind of trust spoken of in our Psalm this morning. The devil took that trust Jesus had, and took the trusting one's identity, and wove a test that made it seem entirely plausible that Jesus could throw himself off the top of the temple and God's holy angels would not even allow Jesus' foot to be dashed against a stone. So go ahead, says the devil. You're the Son of God. You have license to act pretty much any way you want to act, and God's got your back. He's not going to risk losing his Son.

This third test has powerful imagery. You can almost visualize hundreds of angels hovering gently above the rocky ground, just inches from it, cushioning the potential body blow. The devil seductively paints this picture that Jesus—and you and I--can see.

But if you can't quite visualize hundreds of angels hovering above the ground, then try this: Like many of you, I've been watching the Olympics on TV, in between commercials. Shaun White (aka "The Flying Tomato") has won gold in

snowboarding—he is a bold and exciting and gifted athlete, a world-famous sensation, and a celebrity whose talents are already lucrative for him. I learned that Shaun practices his most secret half-pipe tricks (such as the Double McTwist 1260) at a secluded location in the Colorado mountains. You can only reach this location by snowmobile or helicopter—it's truly out in the wilderness. One of Shaun's sponsors, Red Bull (the high energy drink), helped finance the construction of this private half-pipe. It is 550 feet long, 22 feet deep, and carved into the side of a 12,000 foot high mountain. Its construction required 30 shipments of helicopter-delivered snow and 8,000 lb. of welded steel. Now, I would be digressing if I made much editorial comment on whether an amateur Olympic athlete with his own half-pipe gains unfair advantage over other amateurs who lack the finances for a private half-pipe. Perhaps we could debate that in another venue.

But what I found most riveting and what connects this to our Gospel reading for me was what was constructed at the right end of the half-pipe. It is a 20 foot by 20 foot box filled with hundreds of high-density foam cubes that will cushion Shaun if he falls. Shaun can trust that Red Bull won't let him dash his foot against a stone. Shaun White, the world's best snowboarder, has license to do pretty much any thing he wants at that half-pipe, and Red Bull's got his back. Red Bull is not about to risk losing its number one walking advertisement. So go ahead, Shaun, and work on your tricks. You have more medals to win!

See how the devil attempts to manipulate Jesus, given his identity as the Son of God, and given his complete trust in that God? The devil cites scripture that hundreds of cushiony angels are waiting to catch Jesus if he falls. Certainly Jesus can test God and not worry because, after all, Jesus hasn't even had a chance to go out and do God's work yet! It's way too early in the journey for Jesus to die.

But what is Jesus' response to this third and highly-tempting suggestion? Well, Jesus could quote scripture, too, and rightly interpret it, for that matter. Jesus told the devil: *It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*

In the end, Jesus did not take up his "bragging rights." He clearly rejected any idea that he should demand and expect special treatment simply because he was the Son of God. In fact, it is precisely because he did trust God that he did not need to test God. God the Father would be faithful. God the Son knew that. So God the Son would be faithful in return. Thus you and I learn the answer to the question: "What **kind** of Son of God will Jesus be?"

You and I are on a journey this season of Lent, focusing on the gift of God's Son for the life of the whole world. Most of us here are baptized in Jesus' name, and understand ourselves to be the children of God. But it doesn't give us "bragging rights" and it doesn't mean we should demand and expect any special treatment. Instead, we are to live like our Lord Jesus does—trusting in God's loving promises, **trusting** enough that we have no need to **test** that love. **AMEN.**

Copyright © 2010, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.