

“Who Are You (Really)?”

I.

Who are you? Who are you really?

Talk about a loaded question.

Growing up in a tiny town, the only son of a severely extroverted father, I always knew exactly who I was: “Harry’s boy.” I spent the first 18 years of my life in that town and, to this day, I am convinced that half of the people never bothered to learn my name. They just thought of me as an extension of him. But I must have a thing for being attached to big personalities. About five minutes after saying “I do,” I realized that, from now on, to many many people, I would only be known as “Mary Beth’s husband.” It’s OK. I’ve been called worse.

It is a funny thing about identity: we may never know who we really are, but everyone else seems so eager to tell us: you’re a child, a parent, a neighbor, a friend. You’re a big success, an important person, a mover and a shaker. You’re an idiot, a failure, a freak, a fraud. You’re nobody.

Who are you, really? And how do you even know? It may be the hardest question we ever have to answer, and we’re never really done with it. But at least we are not alone when we struggle with it. When it comes to the question of identity, even Jesus—*especially* Jesus—has been there and done that. That is why he went out to the wilderness. And in this season of Lent, we are invited to follow.

II.

Our text for today tells of the temptation of Jesus, and I will be the first to admit it: this is a pretty strange story, even by the standards of the Bible. Jesus goes without anything to eat for a very long time, is magically whisked from one location to the other in the blink of an eye and has an actual, face-to-face conversation with the actual devil. It is just weird. If you find that you can not take it literally, well, welcome to the club. But we should try to take it seriously. When we do that, this strange story starts speaking to us in surprising ways.

It helps to have a little context: where does this strange story fall within the wider story of Luke’s Gospel? Well, just before the temptation, Luke devotes a lot of space to the question of Jesus identity. We get a genealogy—tells us who Jesus is by telling us who his people are—and just before that we get the story of his baptism, where the Holy Spirit descends and the voice of God speaks and we hear one answer to the question of who Jesus is: “*You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” Then, immediately after the temptation story, we read about the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry –that sermon at Nazareth that starts out so well and ends up with a bloodthirsty mob.

So, between the baptism and the big reveal, we find this story of temptation. And to me, that suggests this story has something do with the question of Jesus’ identity. Having heard the Spirit say that he is God’s beloved Son, Jesus takes some time and some space to struggle with all of that. What does it mean to be beloved and chosen by God? What exactly does God intend for him to do? Who is he, really? Out in the

wilderness, before his work can begin, Jesus must wrestle with the question of his own identity.¹

But he will not wrestle alone. At the end of 40 days, the devil drops by for a visit. And did you notice the very first words out of the devil's mouth? *If you are the Son of God.* Give the devil his² due: He knows exactly what is going on here. He has come to hit Jesus where it hurts –to poke and to probe at this still-sensitive question: Who are you? Who are you really?" So each temptation explores the issue of identity. Each temptation forces Jesus to face the question of who he is and what God intends for him to do.³ When we keep that in mind, this strange story starts making sense.

So: the first temptation -turning a stone into bread. Seems like a logical thing to do, and after 40 days of fasting, Jesus must be famished. But this is not about bread. It cuts far deeper than that. As God's Beloved, as the Chosen One, will Jesus use his power to meet his own needs? He does not always have to focus on the hungry and the poor and the outcast and the sick. He could use his favored status to seek a little personal gain –just a small meal when he is really hungry. Turning a stone into bread -hardly a federal offense.

But Jesus is not interested. Quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy, he replies to the devil, "*It is written, One does not live by bread alone.*" Jesus knows that he has been chosen by God, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the world. He will not exploit his special status in order to meet his own needs. Some things matter more than bread.

The second temptation: the kingdoms of the earth. In an instant, Jesus sees all the nations of the known world –the vast empire of Rome, spread before his feet.⁴ "All this will be yours," the devil whispers. "All you have to do is worship me." Now, pay attention here. The second temptation is subtle. The devil knows that Jesus probably has little interest in the *trappings* of power: riding around in limousines, making big speeches to adoring crowds. But as God's Beloved, as the Chosen One, Jesus might be tempted to seize power for the sake of doing good. Just imagine: same old empire, but with Jesus as Caesar; the power of Rome harnessed for the purpose of God.

But Jesus is not interested. Again he draws on the Book of Deuteronomy: "*It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'*" Jesus knows that nobody ever beats Caesar at his own game. You cannot use the crude implements of the empire to bring about the reign of God. You can serve God *or* you can seek power, but it is awfully hard to do both.

The third temptation: throw yourself down. The devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem, the highest point for miles around. And this time it is Satan who breaks out some Scripture, quoting a couple of verses from Psalm 91 about God's angels protecting God's people from harm. Reading between the lines here, it sounds like the devil wants Jesus to throw himself off the top of the Temple so that angels will have to intervene, swooping down dramatically to save God's Chosen One from certain death.

This temptation may be the hardest one to understand. But remember: this is about Jesus' identity. What kind of a Savior will he be? Who is he really? Well, if he does what the devil wants him to do, he will be spectacular and he will be famous –rescued by angels, in broad daylight, in downtown Jerusalem, for all the world to see. In an instant, everyone would know that Jesus is the real deal, the certifiable Son of God.⁵ Then everyone would want to follow him. It is a marketing ploy, a shortcut to success and, when you think about it, it is kind of brilliant.⁶

But Jesus is not interested. One more time, he answers from the Book of Deuteronomy: “*It is said, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*” By now, I think that Jesus has started to see the path that God calls him to walk, the work that God calls him to do. He already has some sense of where all of this is leading. And there will be no shortcuts, no quick fixes, no easy success. Betrayed, denied, abandoned and alone, Jesus will go to the cross –because that is who he is and that is what God intends for him to do. Really.

So: three strikes and the devil is out. But this isn’t over. The temptation story ends on an ominous note: *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him...until an opportune time.* The devil will be back for another round.⁷ But for now, at least, the way forward is clear. Jesus knows who he is. Jesus knows what God intends for him to do. He is ready to walk the path laid out before him.

And we are invited to follow.

III

I know, I know: Easier said than done. Every Lent we are invited to look to Jesus; to take up our cross and follow. And every single time I hear that invitation, I suspect that I am not up to the task. I’m still too focused on my own needs, still trying to trick Caesar into building the reign of God, still looking for some spectacular shortcut that will spare me from carrying the cross. I know that I am invited to follow but I doubt that I’m able to do it.

Maybe you feel the same way. But we are in luck, because Lent is a season for struggle –a time for us to wander off the beaten path of our lives and into the wilderness where we wrestle with these questions: Who are *we*? Where are *we* headed? What does God intend for *us* to do? Enormous questions. And we may not find the answers anytime soon. That is OK. Mostly, we need to learn to live with the questions.

We can start at this table –at God’s table, where Christ himself is the host and where no one will be turned away. At the table, every one of us is invited to hear the voice of God’s still-speaking Spirit -calling *us* beloved, claiming *us* for God’s purpose, calling our identity into question. Make no mistake: this table is dangerous. When we eat the bread, when we drink the cup, God gets a hold of us, God gets inside of us and God starts to mess with us. We may be led from this table to places we do not want to go. We may be asked at this table to do things we do not think we can do. At this table we discover that we belong to God and guess what? God has got some plans for us.

So come to this table...if you dare. Come to learn what your life is all about, to discover the One to whom you truly belong. Come to this table to find out who you are. Really.

Plymouth Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667
E-mail: mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com

Notes

¹ Although I would love to claim originality of insight, the connection of Jesus' identity to the story of his temptation is well-recognized by commentators. See, for example, R. Alan Culpepper's treatment of this passage in the *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX: Luke, John*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

² With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy: You might be a UCC minister if you actually put a fair amount of thought into the question of whether or not one should use gendered language to refer to the devil. In this sermon, I do, but not without some reservations.

³ I am intrigued by David L. Tiede's suggestion that we are meant to see Jesus succeeding where Israel failed—spending a period in the wilderness and not succumbing to faithlessness. I do not think this reading in any way contradicts my focus on identity, but it does suggest a different direction for a sermon. See Tiede's notes to Luke's Gospel in *The Access Bible*. Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, General Editors. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.89.

⁴ My reading of this verse depends on Luke Timothy Johnson's claim that by using *oikumene* (instead of *kosmos*, as in Matthew) Luke has in mind a very specific political concept—that of Empire. *Sacra Pagina Series*. Volume 3: The Gospel of Luke. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Editor. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p.74.

⁵ I never read this story without thinking of Henri Nouwen's wonderful little book *In The Name of Jesus: Reflection on Christian Leadership*. (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989). Much more of my thought than I even realize is indebted to Nouwen's thoughts about this passage.

⁶ So I like Fred Craddock's suggestion—which immediately makes sense to any preacher—that the devil is tempting Jesus to coerce belief by performing some sort of magic trick. *Luke. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. James L. Mays, Ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), pp.54-57.

⁷ Luke's conclusion is in keeping with the New Testament theme that Jesus' entire life constituted one long temptation (cf. Hebrews 2:18, 4:15). To explore the concept further, see the entry on *peiradzo* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume VI. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp.23-26.