

Year C, Lent 1

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Luke 4:1-13

Contending Voices

On the first Sunday of Lent we begin with Jesus going into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. Who is this devil? Why does Jesus have to encounter him at all? We don't know that we believe in the devil anymore so what can we learn from this? And finally how does any of this prepare us for Easter?

"Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit." I think being full of the Holy Spirit means being completely under the influence of God's love; feeling that warmth of security and benevolence that comes from the inside and fills us with an inner serenity. Yes, maybe it is a little like being under the influence in that other way we know. So Jesus returns from the Jordan River having been baptized there and he is so full of God's totally benevolent and unambiguous love that at this point there is no room for anything else.

Then my imagination takes a strange leap. Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit like a freshly filled stock tank for watering cattle in early spring. The tank is full of water that is pure and clear to the bottom. Drinking this water can only be refreshing, sustaining, life-giving and deeply satisfying.

But then I remember the stock tanks of my childhood as they were in the heat of summer. While the tank was full of water, by then it contained aquatic forests of algae obscuring the depth and pads of algae that drifted across the surface. Drinking this water was the last thing a boy would want to do though the cows didn't seem to mind.

Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit like that clear water in the stock tank but did the water contain hints of algae that would quickly bloom into a forest of floating green when time had passed and summer heat arrived? Was it safe for drinking? Could it stand analysis under a microscope?

To play with our metaphor, the water of Jesus' spirit had to be tested to make sure it was pure. And so "Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." The Spirit always wants what is best for the human race and so leads Jesus into the wilderness where his spirit will be tested to see if drinking his water is safe.

There is something profoundly honest about sending Jesus to a barren place away from John the Baptist and all other human influence for his testing. This sense of God's presence within must be grounded in God and God alone and not built on the desire to be popular, liked or approved by the significant humans who co-inhabit his life.

"There (in the wilderness) he was tempted for forty days by the devil." That's a long time to be alone with the devil inside your head. I wonder if it is like solitary confinement. Many advocates for prisoners say solitary confinement should be outlawed particularly for young people. Being alone that long can do permanent damage. I think the devil is Luke's way of talking about the demons in our head and they can get pretty wild when we are left alone with them. Didn't Native American children go into the wilderness on a quest when they reached a certain age? They believed the outcome of that quest determined who they became as adults.

Being deeply interested in psychology and anthropology and believing the New Testament, in its pre-scientific way, gives us an understanding of humanness that modern science is only beginning to discover, I see Jesus' conversation with the devil as a way to talk about the battle going on within Jesus.

Like all of us, Jesus has many contending voices and then he also has the Spirit of his father. Will he listen to God or give in to the voices that have come from other places? If we could remember where these voices came from it would be much easier to challenge them. But often we can't. The owners of the voices have usually disappeared like the dreams we forget upon waking.

For example right now our country is asking itself whether or not it is racist. If we white people are racist, where might those attitude have come from? Ah, I remember my uncle. He was cool and I admired him. Because I wanted to be like him I adopted some of his attitudes without knowing it or thinking about it. Now that uncle is long dead but I still carry the attitude he carried toward people of a different race. It's algae in the water that blooms when the conditions are right.

Well, the same was true of Jesus. He leaves the Jordan River Valley full of the Holy Spirit but being fully human and formed in human community he has acquired many values that aren't shaped by love for all. As we know from what later happened in Nazareth, his community tended to dismiss, ignore and even despise those who were not of their village.

What Luke portrays as an encounter with the devil we can portray as Jesus wrestling with voices whose origin was not from God. You see, the devil is both outside us in the form of voices we have taken in and inside us in the form of what we now think of as our own voice though not guided by what's best for all. Let's briefly look at the three temptations and see how this works.

Jesus ate nothing for forty days and afterward he was starving. “The devil said to him, ‘Since you are God’s Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’” Since you are special you can take shortcuts to character development. You don’t need to work at it; to pray, to fast, to do spiritual disciplines, exercise and read books to grow as a person. You can ignore those hard processes and still get there.

Don’t we struggle with the idea that we are so special we don’t have to say “no” to ourselves sometimes? At 3:00 a.m. in the morning after eating too much and eating it too late in the day on the second day of Lent I decided I would give up that self-destructive practice for Lent. I am hoping this will become a permanent life-style adjustment. Jesus said “People won’t live only by bread.” Oh, but it is so tempting!

“Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world.” You can have all that Jesus. It’s mine and I will give it to you if you worship me. That’s a struggle we know. If we play your cards right, we can be powerful and the envy of our neighbors. All we have to do is serve our ego, forget your neighbor and it’s all ours. Besides we will make your ancestors proud. “Jesus answered, ‘It’s written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’” You mean I can’t serve only myself!

“The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here; for it’s written: He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you and they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.” Take risks, for God will protect you at the last minute. Pour pollutants into the water, the air, the earth and the sea. Allow earth’s temperature to rise. You can do all of this boldly, do it unthinkingly, do it consistently for God will rescue the earth at the very last minute. Go ahead, jump into environmental free fall, nothing will happen to you.

“Jesus answered, ‘It’s been said, don’t test the Lord your God.’” Maybe God will rescue us but then maybe God won’t. Don’t test him. You mean we may have to change the way we live if our planet is to remain habitable?

After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity. For Jesus this testing was over but there were more to come. Even the Garden of Gethsemane was a test.