

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.'"⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

What do you intend to do with what power you're given?

Maybe you've never asked yourself this question. Maybe you don't think about yourself as having much power, or not so much that you'd be best to interrogate your intent with it. Most people don't have that much power. On the other hand, most people have at least some measure of power. And it's not for nothing we have the phrase "petty tyrant," "schoolyard bully."

Jesus had just been granted tremendous power—or had just been revealed to have access to tremendous power, or to be filled with tremendous power. The Holy Spirit: it was promised of him since the beginning. It was his cousin John who'd made the connection, the promise: "...one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." So, it was understood, the power to fill Jesus was the power of the Holy Spirit. John was filled with the power of Elijah, the great prophet, then *ur*-prophet. Jesus was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

We'll be hearing a lot about the Holy Spirit this year. Luke speaks a lot of the Holy Spirit, twice mentioned in this passage alone, one right after another, as if insisting. Luke, which is the gospel narrative we'll follow this liturgical year, from Advent to Reign of Christ Sunday, December to November, is the most spirit-filled narrative, the one that most persistently understands it's only by the power of the Holy Spirit that anything happens at all. Speaking specifically, according to Luke, the coming of Christ, the birth of the church, the testimony of the apostles, any miracle or prophetic word all happen because of the Spirit. Speaking more generally, any word or occurrence

that is true or beautiful or enduring, any such thing that bears the breath of life or the wind of creation happens by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This isn't easy for a lot of people. The ephemeral nature of what's being named here, the unbound and largely unseen nature of this entity makes it hard to grasp, literally so. For others, this is the easiest of the three persons of God to believe in—Father, Son, Spirit; Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit—because it's so present: what you inhale, what you exhale, what you speak when it sounds most clear and plain and gets the most immediate and real response, what's gone when someone dies as you sit with them, if that's something you've ever done. The Holy Spirit is the thing that makes the difference between a living body and a dead one, a change that happens in but a moment but makes all the difference in the world.

Last winter, our old dog Gus died. He was dying for a few days while I held him, and while we all petted him and comforted him. That final day, we left the living room for dinner in the dining room, left him on the carpeted floor where he seemed comfortable. When we returned, he was gone. That's even the phrase, right?

We wrapped his body to await a time for burial, when the frozen ground would give way a bit, wrapped it up and tucked it away on our porch. I couldn't stand the sight of it. It was just wrong somehow. Though nothing had changed, everything had changed.

The Holy Spirit.

It suggests, of course, that there are unholy spirits. Spirits of deception or dissemblance: these mess with your *perception* or pervert *resemblance*. Spirits of destruction or uncreation: these oppose *construction* or a building up. Spirits of division or acrimony or accusation, these are the *diabolos*, which is to say the devil, the divider; these are the satanic, which is to say in Hebrew, *Satan*, the accuser or the spirit of accusation, the laying of blame.

I believe in these unholy spirits. I do. I say this knowing it puts me out step with a lot of modern thinking, maybe puts me out of where you can hear me or stay with me. Much talk of such things sounds silly or self-righteous, stuff just begging to be satirized. The Church Lady from late 80s Saturday Night Live comes to mind. Comedian Dana Carvey's creation, the Church Lady thought anything enjoyable in life, anything and everything frivolous or just for fun came from "Satan....?" It was a funny bit. It always made me laugh, or at least smirk with recognition of who was being spoofed. It wasn't Jesus. It wasn't the Gospel of Luke. It was flinching piety, brittle or superficial churchiness.

Deeper than that, though, maybe, was a light attempt to laugh at what is actually quite scary, dark and frightening—that there *are* such spirits at work in the world and that they’re ever available at any opportune time, and once they come to dominate in a dynamic or a web of relationships, they’re very difficult to reverse. It takes something radical, something even sacrificial, some scapegoat to absorb the wrath—a holocaust to the Lord, in the language of the King James Old Testament.

A holocaust to the Lord: this likely lands in our hearing as something also dark. No longer sounding like something sacred, a holocaust likely strikes us as profane, horrifying. It’s an utter turning inside out of the meaning of “holocaust,” and it actually tracks with history. In the light of the New Testament, it’s revealed that seeking and sacrificing a scapegoat is no longer valid. This is now longer a valid way back from, or out of, dynamics of destruction. A sacred bloodletting, as was once done at a temple altar, we now see as having been done in the ovens of Auschwitz, and it will no longer do since it always involves the death of the innocent, or at least the death of the not any-more-guilty-than-anyone-else. Jesus’ having taken this dynamic and response unto himself is the final time when this will function with any validity, any truth.

From now on, there is only rightly the way of self-giving love.

From now on, there is only rightly the way of Christ, who took on the cross that worldly power could no longer justify the use of such dark force, could no longer assert that such moves are good or God-blessed. Now, we are to understand, it is only devilish.

Though here we must be careful—for as soon as you recognize that something is devilish, you’re operating in the very mode of the devilish. Division, accusation: to recognize and call out such a thing as devilish is to engage in such a thing as the devilish.

We must be very careful here. We must not become ourselves an opportune time. Opportunity for the divisive, as it is, abounds.

It’s for this that the devil could say truly to Jesus of the kingdoms of the empire that all had been given over to him, and that he could give it to anyone he wanted. All Jesus would have to do is join and worship this powerful spirit of division, this powerful spirit of divide-and-conquer, of accusation and intimidation and menace and a deep shadow of death.

Would he do it? He certainly *could* do it. But would he?

Would you?

What do you intend to do with what power you’re given? Seek your own glory? Take all the credit and displace all the blame? Save your own skin?

It would make sense. It wouldn't surprise me at all, which is nothing against you. It's the same with me. It's really challenging to be as Christ.

The temptation narrative, which we just heard, always kicks off the season of Lent. This season of forty days, not including Sundays: it will give us six weeks' preparation for the astonishing gift of Easter Sunday, Resurrection Day, a scapegoat killed and then returned alive to the world that had killed him to offer but this: peace, forgiveness, a new way, a far more difficult way, but a life-sustaining way like no other. Death dealt will ultimately come for itself. Death-dealing will self-devour. Life poured out, on the other hand, is like a bush burning though never consumed.

This story of the temptation is heard tell in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This means it's available for us in all three liturgical years, Year A when we follow Matthew, Year B when we follow Mark, and this, year C, as we follow Luke. A voice of division speaks to Jesus—from beyond him, from within him, always as ever looking for an opportune time.

The division comes with word one: “*If you are the Son of God...*”

The voice of God had just earlier declared that he is. At Jesus' baptism there came the voice to say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It addressed him. This voice: it addressed Jesus. In the other gospel narratives of this event, the voice is remembered to have declared of Jesus but to the crowd: “This is my Son, the Beloved.” But in Luke the assurance is remembered to have come directly to Jesus, “*You are my Son...*”

The divider, then, the *diabolos*, the devil would aim to cleave Jesus from this central truth. “*If you are the Son of God...*”

It recalls the original time this divisive voice is heard, in the garden from the serpent, “Did God say that you couldn't eat of any fruit of the garden?” which of course, God did say, sort of. Didn't he?

God said you, “You *can* eat of every fruit, but of this one fruit you shall not eat.”

So, he sort of said that they couldn't eat of any fruit, but he also said they could eat of most of the fruit. But the latter means God is generous with one prohibition, while the former God is ungenerous through and through.

So, which was it?

The serpent's just asking questions. He just wanted to know what sort of God this is: one who withholds one thing while giving of all other things, or one who withholds *everything*.

Which is it?

He's just asking questions.

Eve was confused.

Jesus wasn't. He knew exactly whom he was dealing with in the devil, and he know how to resist.

The temptations were all about power—about what Jesus would do with the power he was recently so fully revealed to have been given. Would he use his power to make bread miraculously, which could feed not only him but also the whole hungry, desperate world? Would he use his power to put on a show, to himself become such a spectacle, thrown down from the pinnacle for the Temple only to be born up by angels? Would he harness the ancient method of bread and circus to keep the people docile and under his thumb, this ancient thought yet current mode? Emperors have long used. Now economies do. Low prices and terrific entertainment. Make it so we can gas up our cars for cheap and get to the multiplex. Otherwise, we'll vote you out of office.

Bread and circus. Would he do it?

Would we want him to?

What about you? What would you do?

If you're looking to keep Lent this year, maybe in the practice of giving something up, but you haven't yet decided what to give up, try giving up the use of power for anything other than service in God's grace.

It's worth a try.

It's only six weeks.

But knowing you like I do, I'd bet you've been practicing that Lenten discipline with much of your life. Maybe now just notice that.

And thanks be to God.