

The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany (C)  
March 10, 2019  
Text: Luke 4:1-13

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I hear fairly regularly from the bank that handles one of my credit cards, reminding me to keep an eye on my balance, and to be sure I only make purchases from secure websites. They remind me to be vigilant about my personal information, and that they will never call me to ask me to confirm my account number or social security number. They're concerned about the possibility of identity theft, and I'm glad that they take it so seriously.

I wonder if "identity theft" might be a helpful image for us as we begin our journey through the season of Lent, as we reflect on our Gospel story for this morning. Perhaps thinking about "identity theft" can help us imagine what sort of journey this is, and why we do it. Lent is the season of 40 days leading up to Easter—it's a time for spiritual preparation and reflection, to pay attention to our lives. It's like an annual boot camp experience for us as people of faith. We exercise our faith through practices like prayer or fasting, Bible reading or works of love. It's a time to be renewed in our core identity as children of God—people whose lives are being defined by God's compassion and forgiveness, by Jesus' way of service and generosity. We need this time of renewal because there are things we encounter and contend with every day that would try to undercut that identity, that would rob us of the blessing and joy and sense of purpose that belong to us as God's people.

"Identity theft" is also a way of picturing what's going on in our gospel story for today. Fresh from the experience of his baptism, fresh from hearing the divine proclamation, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased," Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. I imagine that time as part "personal retreat" and part "vision quest." It was a time away from all of the regular routines of life to sharpen his focus, and prepare for the work that lay ahead of him. Through that time, Jesus was tested, tempted by the devil. Our gospel story is full of fantastical visual imagery—of the devil showing Jesus in an instant all the kingdoms of the world, of the devil taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. I wonder if it would be helpful for you to view these temptations as imaginative descriptions of what the inner experience of temptation was like for Jesus—sort of like dramatizing what it felt like for Jesus to struggle internally with his identity as God's beloved Son, what it was like to wrestle with some very different possibilities for exercising that identity.

When we explore these three temptations as testing what sort of identity Jesus would embrace, I think it helps clarify some of the things that seem rather odd about the story. For example, in the first test, what could possibly be wrong with turning a stone into a loaf of bread? In fact, in the miracle of feeding 5000 people, Jesus did something very much like that. But if we look at this temptation as an attempt to steal Jesus' real identity and give him something else instead, then it suddenly makes sense. As Son of God, would Jesus use his power to serve himself, or would he remain true to his calling to serve others, to

live his life as an expression of God's love and compassion for all? Jesus refused to put himself and his wants and needs at the center of every decision. Instead, he would find his security in God's generous providing.

In the second test, the devil offers Jesus power and authority. He could be king of the world, but in a way that sidesteps the path that leads to the cross. The devil offers power without humility, without sacrifice, without obedience to God—power there for the taking. As Son of God, would Jesus grab whatever he could get for himself, or would he remain true to his calling to reveal God's way of compassion and mercy and kindness? Jesus refused to let expedience be his guide, to grasp for whatever he could get. Instead, he chose to be obedient to God, all the way to the cross.

Finally, in the third test, the devil invited Jesus to use his relationship with God to make himself famous, to make people look at him with awe. Jump from the pinnacle of the temple, and let them see how special you are! As Son of God, would Jesus use God like a tool to manipulate people, to enhance his stature in their eyes? Or would he allow his life to be a vehicle for God's purposes of forgiveness and reconciliation, of healing and overcoming evil? Jesus refused to treat his relationship with God as a thing to be exploited for his own benefit. Instead, he chose to take his stand on God's values of compassion and love of enemies, generosity and working for peace. He would let people turn to him, or against him, on those grounds.

For Jesus, the temptations around bread and power and fame—at their heart they were really about whether he would be true to his calling to embody God's love and forgiveness, God's compassion and kindness, or whether he would take a false identity instead, choosing a life that was all about his desires and his convenience. We might not experience temptation exactly like this, but I have no doubt that we are tested—and that the testing that really matters concerns our identity, whether the foundation for our lives will be God's gracious gift of love and forgiveness, or whether we'll be fooled into trying to build our lives on something else, like our wealth or possessions, our status or power.

For example, every day I see and hear advertisements that tell me, in one way or another, that my life isn't enough. They tell me I need a new car or new clothes, a new cell phone or a new something, in order to experience joy or contentment. And these advertisements want me to see myself first of all as a consumer of products—rather than a beloved child of God who has been given this most amazing gift of life and relationships and a share in the abundance of creation. They're trying to steal my identity! And almost every day, as I hear the news, I hear politicians telling me that there's something I need to be afraid of, whether it's immigrants or crime or taxes or guns or something else, and I need to support them so they can protect me! They want me to be afraid, rather than entrust myself to God's care and invest myself in Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and love of enemies. They're trying to steal my identity! And I could go on and on, because we are tested by more than just marketing and politics. In every facet of life, we can find ourselves tested—who will we be? Will we be God's person, devoted to Jesus and

following his way of life? Or will we accept some substitute identity, some other way of feeling secure, making meaning for our lives?

That's what makes Lent such a beautiful and powerful season. It's all about turning our hearts to God, the source of our true identity and our true life. It's like what we sang together just a few minutes ago: "Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Lent is about being renewed in our true identity as children of God, as followers of Jesus, whose lives are being shaped by the Spirit of God working in us. Lent is about returning to the gift we received in baptism—we are children of God, loved, forgiven, set free. Lent is about shaking off every meager substitute that we're tempted to embrace, so that we can live confidently and hopefully and courageously as God's dearly beloved people. Thanks be to God. Amen.