

As always for the first Sunday in Lent we look at the temptation, or more accurately described as the testing of Jesus, by the devil in the wilderness. You probably know this story well. But to understand it, especially the way Luke portrays it, we have to go back a step.

This testing of Jesus takes place right after his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. After that the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for forty days to be tested by the devil. This is always an unnerving text; at least it is to me. I don't like the idea of God driving his Son, or anyone, out to be tested. But God is God, and I am not. If I could have it be my way I'd have God fit into a into a nice, sweet, consistent picture. But God doesn't. Anyway, that is for a different sermon.

So the chronology of events goes that Jesus is baptized and then driven into the wilderness. The gospel of Mark and the gospel of Matthew both go from one event right to the next. But Luke does something odd here. He interrupts the story line to insert the genealogy of Jesus. Why do that? Matthew's gospel does something logical with Jesus' genealogy. He puts it right

at the very beginning of the gospel. He starts off, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus..." Root the main character into history right from the beginning.

But Luke doesn't, and for a very good reason. His genealogy starts off, "Jesus was the son (as was thought) of Joseph, son of Heli..." and so on and so on all the way back to, "son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam." And then this very interesting note, "...son of God." In Luke's genealogy Adam is described as the son of God. And of course, who else is the son of God? Jesus. To make that obviously clear the voice from heaven says after Jesus' baptism, "You are my Son..."

Now two questions can come up here. One is the historical reliability of Jesus' genealogy. I'm always on to say that you have to analyze everything critically. There is no way to prove the historical accuracy of any part of Jesus' genealogy. And science proves that it cannot be reliable. As is so often the case people take biblical texts and use them to give answers they weren't intended to give. Some people have tried to date the age of the earth by this sort of thing. That wasn't its intention. Some people feel alarmed that the Bible isn't historically accurate or reliable if this sort of thing cannot be proven true. Again, that's missing the point.

The real question isn't, how reliable is this? The real question is, why does Luke include this? And, what does it mean? Ask those questions and you've get solid answers.

Luke wants us to understand the testing of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness through the lens of the Garden of Eden story. That's the point of the genealogy and why it is here. You'll remember, how does the Garden of Eden story turn out? Not so good. (All is fine and good for Adam, he's finally gotten the girl of his dreams, but all too quickly she ruins his life.) Adam and Eve fail. They get kicked out of the garden. What is their failing? They eat the forbidden fruit. But is that act in and of itself so terrible? No. The real sin, and the whole point of the story is to explain why there is evil in the world and what is the root of it - the root being that people wanted to be like God. Or said differently, Adam and Eve acted outside of God's will. That is the lens Luke wants us to have with the testing of Jesus account.

The devil tests him, "Since you are the Son of God command this stone to become of loaf of bread." Come on Jesus, you're hungry. You need nourishment. You have the power to get what you need for yourself *so use it*.

This is not such a bad thing. What's wrong with using the abilities you've been given by God in order to get what you

need? There's no problem at all - except that in this case and at this time God's will for Jesus was to be in the wilderness and famished. Jesus will not use his powers outside of God's will.

The second test from the devil: Jesus, bow down and worship me and I will give you the glory of the world and all its power. This is not talking about literally bowing down before the devil. This is about Jesus giving credence to business as usual in the world. The devil's saying if you scratch my back I'll scratch your back. The question is, Jesus are you going to operate by the rules of power and status and money that everyone else operates by? Are you going to leverage your abilities and your position for your own good?

If Jesus were to succumb to this test we wouldn't have the savior we need. We'd just have business as usual.

The third test: Jesus throw yourself down from the roof of the temple. I've heard this test explained as a test to see if Jesus would perform some spectacle to draw attention to himself. I won't disagree with that, but I think there is a better explanation: Jesus, you have God's protection. You have a divine AAA Roadside Assistance card in your wallet. Are you willing to use it when you need it?

I think this gets to the heart of the matter. You know well that this isn't the end of the testing. Our gospel reading ends, "When the devil had finished every test he departed from him until an opportune time." You know how the story goes. This testing episode we just had. It was mere child's play. This was just Jesus and the devil playing in the sandbox compared to the tests that are really coming. When is the opportune time? Gethsemane, and the crucifixion.

In Gethsemane or during Jesus' trial or especially on the cross the devil's saying, "Jesus, you still have that divine AAA Roadside Assistance card in your pocket. Are you going to use it?"

Now that's a test.

And let's raise the stakes even higher, because dying a painful and death isn't the only thing. Imagine Jesus hanging on the cross. He is in incredible pain but at any moment he could stop the pain by his own power. And the devil comes to him and says: "Jesus, are you really going to go through with this? You're hanging up here bloody and naked for the world to see. You're going to die, and for what? Look at your rag-tag bunch of followers. They ditched you before things even got hot. Do you think they're suddenly going to become loyal because you die? And even if they do, look at them. They're a

bunch of uneducated, untalented, unconnected, nitwits. They're not effective people. They can't do it!

"No, you say? You're still willing to go through with it? Let me show you something here Jesus." And imagine the devil taking Jesus into a little private movie theater and saying, "Let me show you some clips of what's going to happen if you do indeed go through with it." And the devil shows him clips of recent scandals from priests in the Catholic Church. "All because of you. All done in your name Jesus." And then the devil shows him the Jewish Holocaust: "All done in your name." The crusades, brutal colonization of the world by European powers: "All done in your name, Jesus." Roman brutalities, slavery, executions, millions upon millions upon countless millions of examples of pain and death done in the name of Jesus. "Now Jesus, this is what's going to happen if you go through with it. It's in your power to change it all. Just use your power in a way that makes sense."

When we read about Adam and Eve failing in the Garden of Eden it is easy to oversimplify their situation. Jesus' death on the cross was also not simple or clear or straightforward. Never underestimate the subtlety and the true power of evil.

When Jesus died on that cross he did it against all reason and logic. By any and every measure it was stupid. It was

foolish. In spite of absolute and completely rock solid evidence that this was the wrong thing to do, despite feeling ashamed, alone, and abandoned - feeling abandoned by God himself, Jesus trusted God the Father in heaven.

Jesus' trust in God didn't waver when all was black.

And don't let your mind give Jesus an escape clause. Don't say, "Yeah, but Jesus was both human and divine. He had something extra that we don't have." Luke won't let you go there. Adam is called Son of God too. That's why the genealogy is placed where it was. Failure was a real possibility. Jesus did not have "something extra" going for him. That no miracle happened at the crucifixion is actually more amazing than the miracle of the resurrection on Easter.

In Philippians 2:10 we read that, "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Realize what an amazing savior we have. Amen