

Sermon for February 14 2016 - 1st Sunday in Lent
Luke 4:1-13

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our living Lord and Savior.
Amen

As you've just heard and read, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days, he ate no food...to the point of being utterly famished...and all the while, he was tempted by the devil.

From these forty days of temptation and fasting, three specific temptations are highlighted by Luke. The devil first offers Jesus bread for his hunger, then power over all the kingdoms of the world, and finally the promise of safety from harm. All Jesus has to do in return is worship the devil.

I'm guessing that these three temptations were but the tip of the iceberg. I would imagine that in the course of forty days in the wilderness, the devil launched a flurry of temptations Jesus' way, all kinds of promises, everything from fame, popularity and security to eternal youth and unimaginable wealth.

Assuming that to be the case, I find myself in agreement with theologian David Lose who believes that the "point (of Luke's story) isn't the (three) specific temptations, but rather the underlying nature of the temptation itself." Lose's thesis is that all of the temptations are part of the devil's attempt to make Jesus question "his relationship to God and the identity he's received through that relationship." In short, Lose says, "Each of the temptations seeks to erode and undercut Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God and therefore undermine Jesus' (very) identity." (In the Meantime, 2/9/2016)

Now it's important to remember that Jesus was baptized just before the Spirit led him into the wilderness. You'll recall that when Jesus came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and a voice from heaven (presumably God's voice) said to him: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This is what the devil is trying to undermine. Again, from David Lose, (The devil is trying) "...to erode Jesus' confidence that he is enough, that he is secure, that he is worthy of God's love. And in the face of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel in order to assert that he is a part of that story and therefore reaffirm his identity as a child of God, rooted in the Scriptures, that is, Jesus is reminded not only that he has enough and is enough but that he is of infinite worth in the eyes of God." (In the Meantime, 2/9/2016)

Well, as you're aware, Jesus refuses to let the devil steal his identity and, in effect, the devil is sent packing. But, ominously, we are told that the devil will return at an opportune time. Perhaps this is the reason that the story of Christ's temptation is included every year on the First Sunday in Lent. We need to know that the devil is still at work attempting to steal OUR identity, attempting to frighten or coerce or deceive us into believing that that we aren't enough, that God's love for us is inadequate, that our identity as children of God is insufficient for the challenges of the day.

What comes to mind for me is the "Stockholm Syndrome." You may or may not be familiar with that term. In short, the "Stockholm Syndrome" is a condition which sometimes happens when people are kidnapped. Captive, defenseless, deprived and dependent, those who have been kidnapped sometimes forget who they really are and the insidiousness of what happened to them, and instead come to identify with their captors and develop feelings of empathy and loyalty toward the ones who are in total control of their lives.

Quite frankly, that's what I see when I look at the way in which many people have succumbed to the onslaught of advertising which plays upon our inadequacies...or to the hypnotic attraction of propaganda spouted by presidential candidates...rhetoric which foments fear, insecurity, hatred and indignation. It may not be the "Stockholm Syndrome" in the classical sense, but it certainly highlights the devil's continued efforts to control us through fear and intimidation, to make us question our identity in God, to seduce us into believing that the devil is the one to trust.

This morning, two little boys, Asher and Liam Hoenke, will be given new identities in the water of baptism. Each of these boys will be marked with the cross of Christ on his forehead and claimed by God for all time as one of God's beloved children. The two boys will come to learn, as they grow older, from their parents, from their god-parents and from you and me that their identity as children of God is in fact all they need.

Throughout the years to come, Asher and Liam will hear over and over again that God loves them and that God will keep on loving them no matter what...and as they hear this good news they will come to understand that they have enough, and that they are enough...in Jesus Christ. Despite all the voices and temptations to the contrary, Asher and Liam will grow up to trust God's promises to them in and through their relationship with Jesus Christ.

Well, dear friends, the same is true for you. All that you really need was promised in your baptism...and made manifest on the Cross. Never forget. You are God's beloved child! Each and every one of you!

God loves you with more energy than that of the sun. God loves you to the most far-flung regions of the universe where black holes are dance and collide. God loves you at this very moment and beyond time itself. Centered in Jesus Christ, you are God's child. There is not a single demonic temptation which can separate you from the God who gave you life, the God who called you by name in the waters of baptism, the God who demonstrated what true love can do in the resurrection of our Lord.

Oh yes, to repeat myself, you are God's child. And though you're not perfect, you are beloved...with you, God is well pleased.

That being said, receive God's blessing. And as you do, feel free to make the sign of the cross upon yourself: O child of God, may Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bless, preserve and protect you all your days. Amen