

1st Sunday in Lent – March 10, 2019
Luke 4:1-13

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to tell you something that happened to me and Helen 24 years ago next month. It was the day of the truck bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, but it had nothing to do with that. Just coincidentally on that same day in England, Helen's father died suddenly and unexpectedly. Once we got over the initial shock of that announcement, we knew that Helen had to get over to England to be with her family, but then quickly realized that we needed to get our daughter Marian a passport. She was only four months old and was still breast feeding, so there was no question of leaving her behind. Fortunately, we lived in Chicago at the time where there was a passport office. Unfortunately, that was in the federal building in Chicago, and the Oklahoma City bombing had everyone on edge, especially around federal buildings. In the midst our chaos, three friends showed up at our apartment. One was a couple from church who we always called our children's surrogate grandparents. They would stay with our older children, Andrew and James, while we went downtown to sort out both the passport situation and plane tickets. (This was back when you actually had to have physical tickets to fly. Remember that?) The third person was a friend of Helen's from work. She put herself to work doing laundry to help Helen get ready for the trip. These three friends were examples of the old adage, "a friend in need is a friend indeed." Now to be fair, we had a bunch of other friends who I'm sure would have also helped us out if we had asked them. But these three showed up of their own accord without our asking, when we didn't yet know what help we needed. It was a real mark of their character, and an example that we have kept in mind ever since. The other character-revealing example from that day were the two airlines that flew direct from Chicago to Manchester, the closest major airport to Helen's family home. One was happy to sell us a ticket at their exorbitant last-minute price. The other had a bereavement policy that made the ticket much more affordable. Guess which airline got our business on future trips to England?

It's too bad that most character-revealing examples that come to our attention tend to be the negative ones: the ones who lie to Congress, the ones who use their position in public office to serve themselves at the public expense, the ones who abuse their power, their position, or their fame for their personal advantage. And what's discouraging is how terribly common it is, from former Illinois governors to Canadian Prime Ministers, from congressmen and women to local officials. And as we have been reminded recently, even the church does not go unscathed. Pastors, priests, church secretaries, council presidents and treasurers – people in all of these categories come to mind just off the top of my head in cases that I happen to know about.

It is Jesus' character that is at stake in our Gospel reading today, in this story of his temptation in the wilderness that we get every year on the first Sunday in Lent. And as usual, context is key. The episode that comes right before this in Luke is Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, after which God's voice speaks out of heaven to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It's a happy coincidence that our Gospel reading last Sunday echoed this announcement at Jesus' Transfiguration. "This is my son... Listen to him." This is what sets up Jesus' temptation, which might be better translated "testing." It's Jesus' character that is being tested here.

(As I said to the children,) One of the ways you could look at the devil here in this story is as a quality-control officer for God. That's even clearer to me in book of Job in the Old Testament. Notice that it is the Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested, and it is the Spirit who will lead Jesus into his earthly mission in that text we had back at the end of January. Jesus was not ambushed by the devil. This encounter, this test, was part of his mission.

And what does the devil say in his test? "If you are the Son of God..." If you are the Son of God, prove it. If you're the Son of God, use your power. Do what the powerful always do. Help yourself. Use power, influence, threats, coercion, violence. Make them fear you and you can rule the world. And not only that, you can do anything you want. Live it up! Go crazy!

It strikes me that the tests that the devil sets here for Jesus are similar to how we sometimes approach God. "God, if you're really there, answer my prayer. Give me what I need, or what I want. Or at least give me a sign. Prove yourself to me!" And it's not always a selfish motive behind our approach. Sometimes it's just dismay at all of the suffering in the world. How can God allow so many people to suffer? Why doesn't God just do what I would do if I were God? Punish the bad people. Stop them from hurting others. Bring down the dictators. Lock up the killers, the abusers, and the thieves. And while he's at it, let's have a cure for cancer, and all of the other diseases that ravage humanity. And surely God could do something about global warming, you know, if God is all powerful. There are plenty of folks who will tell you that it's exactly because God does not operate the way we think God ought to operate that proves that God does not exist. I get it. It's a tempting argument, if you'll pardon the pun.

But this is precisely where Jesus reveals his character. Of course it's no surprise to anyone who pays attention to Jesus for any length of time that he does not do what we expect him to do, to say nothing of what we demand of him. For reasons I do not pretend to fully understand, God does not run the world the way we would run the world if we had God's power. But given our track record of running things, I have to believe that that is a good thing. Instead of ruling from on high, God shows up in the world as one of us in Jesus Christ. He empties himself of his divine advantages and prerogatives to show up in the middle of our hurting world to take our pain and suffering upon himself, and through the mystery of his death and resurrection to undo the ultimate power of all suffering, all evil, all sin, and all death. Jesus' testing in the wilderness reveals the character of God as one who is willing to sacrifice everything to save us from our self-destructive ways and to make possible for us the genuine, selfless, joyful life we were created for.

The God whose character is revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who shows up to save and transform the world, A God who continues to show up throughout history, and throughout our lives. Including today, right here in our midst. As we gather around Word and Sacrament, God shows up right here, right now, to forgive and renew us, to heal and empower us, and to give us hope and compassion in the midst of sorrow and despair. Thanks be to God for doing it God's way. May that good news, that joyful promise, sustain us in our Lenten pilgrimage and throughout our lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.