

We are in the desert with Jesus today... only on the opposite end of our forty days. We have just arrived, finding this wilderness a place where everything is **paired down to basics**. To life at its elemental core. No distractions. No diversions. No amusements. We are here with ourselves and our God. Jesus is at the end of his forty days. It has been him and the elements and the Spirit who led him there immediately following his baptism. It has always intrigued me how Jesus' experience of baptism leads to this desert. Remember the words of love coming from heaven? “You are my beloved child...in you I am well-pleased.” Why don't they lead him back to town to celebrate with friends and family? Instead he goes into to the wilderness where a struggle begins.

The devil appears. There are many ways to interpret this tempting figure who meets Jesus here. Those who think in concrete and literal terms will see him as a human-like figure with the ability to speak much the same as we do, horns and pitch-fork optional. This is one way of trying to get the mind around the concepts of evil and sin as coming to us as a fearsome and tempting force from the outside. Tricky, manipulative, but attractive all the same, ready to trip us up.

But there are others ways. Remember the Job story? There Satan is a rather combative angel of God who is allowed to test Job to prove his faith or lack of it. The nature of the temptations brought before Jesus seem to suggest that this is the devil's object. Will Jesus pass the test for faith in God or not? Or will he cling to the God who loves him? We see in his baptism that he was loved and treasured before he ever spoke a word, gathered a crowd, or performed a miracle. Will Jesus **trust that**?

For others, and this is the closest interpretation to my own, the devil is a component of our inner selves. Perhaps our own **ego gone wild**. The ego is all about self-definition, self-preservation, self-sufficiency, and self-glorification. We begin to notice its beginning in the two year old who learns to say “NO!” and then says it to everything! It is in the teenager who needs to stand out among his peers to feel alive, or the thrill seeker who pushes the edges for the glory of it all. It is part of the elder who turns down all and any help because she refuses to let go even a smidgen of “independence.” It is the part of all of us that thinks that **everything is up to us**, the part that needs to keep total control, to monitor how everything we do looks to others, the part that is mortified by making a mistake, and just loves to be right, especially when we prove another wrong!

The ego is not evil in itself. Only when it begins to take over the personality and becomes a means of control, control of self and others, and a tool for keeping the entire world at arm's length, including God. The two year olds gleeful “no” to everything is part of their development. The thirty or sixty or eighty year olds no to anything that might ask them to change, to consider something new, or even to accept love, is different. It is a sign of arrested development. It is an unfortunate **no to the movement of life and the ever-flowing way of spirit**. If we could imagine it, it looks a little like that figure over there. Ultimately, it is no to the love of God. A refusal to be the beloved child. A denial of our humanity.

Whether you see the devil in this story as an evil force personified, or a testing angel, or a part of the self that cannot accept or rest in love, the temptations are the **same**. Each time a basic question is posed– will we succumb to the need to prove our worth by total **self-sufficiency** (turn stones into bread), by super-human acts (through yourself off this parapet), or by accumulating wealth and power (worship a false god who will give you all the kingdoms of the world). It all **boils down** to one thing – will we **trust the love of God**? Will we find our motivation and justification in the love of God or in something else? Is God’s love sufficient for us? Or will we spend our whole lives trying to earn it? Testing it? Saying “no” to it? Keeping the true life force at arms’ length, replacing it with idols that in the end can do nothing for us.

The core question of Lent is this – will you **let yourself be loved**? No strings, no caveats, no quid pro quo attached. God is the lover. We are the beloved. Can you handle that? We need Lent because many of us can’t. We are still trying to prove that we are **worthy**. And that is when we get ourselves in trouble. That is when the great web of relationship begins to tear.

Everything from refusing the help of others (which is ultimately sign of God’s love coming through these others), to being unable to accept one’s self without doing more, being more, proving more, to, one of its more dangerous manifestations, invading a country to prove to the world one’s importance and invincible strength. Countries have egos as well as individuals. Egos can be organizing forces (their proper role) or they can run rampant causing great damage and suffering. It has also been said that **money** is the root of all evil. It is **not**. But how we use it is often a symptom of the root, when we try to buy our worthiness, accrue our value, instead of accepting it from God. Which I am sure has something to do with the **great disparity of wealth** that has become obscene in our time.

So it seems not so strange that Jesus was led to the wilderness at his baptism. He was **human**. And in the wake of a **great, unearned love** which descended upon him like a dove and spoke to him from heaven, he did not know what to do. He wasn’t sure if he deserved it, or if he trusted it, or if it was real. All the things we struggle with. The temptations to doubt, to take over, to prove it all by himself, came to him, just as they come to us. But in his forty days, he found his way to trusting, to resting, to **plunging into that love**. The love of God became his core, his touchstone, his ever present reality, and his life flowed from that and that only.

We need the season of Lent, to be led into the same wilderness, where we openly face our own temptations, ask our own questions, express our doubt. And we need one another to help us find our way. To encourage us to plunge into the same love. Once we do, we are going to change. For when we **stop keeping the love of God at arms’ length**, and it becomes our core, our lives will flow from a place where all things are possible. Nothing to prove. Nothing to earn. But everything to gain. Amen.