

“I DARE YOU”
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13
February 21, 2010
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Our gospel reading offers one of the most fascinating looks into the life of Jesus found in the Bible. This passage, known as the “temptation” or, more properly I think, the testing of Jesus, occurs directly on the heels of his baptism. This is a moment in his life when his head is undoubtedly spinning. He is all but still dripping from his baptism when the same spirit that descended upon him as he broke through surface of the waters of the Jordan leads him into the wilderness. There is a sense that Jesus goes into the wilderness not really on his own accord, but because the spirit took him there—a divine kidnapping, if you will! Here was this unknowing, approaching middle-age, going-nowhere-soon, son of a carpenter who was suddenly thrown into a position that had been unimaginable just a few days ago. Sure, his parents had probably told him the story of his birth, but after all those years of “normal” life how could he really believe that he was the “Son of God?” Maybe not even Jesus himself, and so as he was led out into the wilderness, he went to discover who he was and what all of this really meant.

When the spirit takes him into that wilderness, he enters into a testing-ground where he is confronted by the devil and we begin to get a sense of him. I think we are learning about Jesus just as he is learning about himself. Often this passage has been used to lift up the moral perfection of Jesus, but I think this is a misreading of the tests that Jesus encounters. These are tests not of his moral acuity, but of his loyalty to God. Is he, or is he not, loyal first to God, and thus worthy of his newly understood status as the Son of God? The devil character here is part purveyor of evil, but also part secret agent, as if he were sent from God to help Jesus uncover his identity. And so the tests begin.

The first test has the devilish secret agent asking, “*If you are the Son of God command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*” *If you are the Son of God...I dare you!* And how does Jesus reply? Not with his own words, but instead he recalls words from his family story, from the stories he would have known as a well-studied Jewish son. Jesus offers words recorded in Deuteronomy 8, and they are words that serve as a response to the “If” question that was proffered by the devil, yet undoubtedly echoing also within the mind of Jesus. And he passes the first test!

But part two of the test follows shortly. *If you are the son of God, I dare you to accept this gift, says the tester! “I will give you the (worldly kingdom’s) glory and all its authority; for it has been given over to me, and I can give it to anyone I please. If you will just worship me, it will all be yours.”* Surely Jesus wrestled with what to do, but rather than accepting the offer Jesus again returns to his story, which is the story of his people and God’s story. His response is simple, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Again he speaks the words of Deuteronomy, and we begin to understand that Jesus is indeed “in the world, but not of the world,” and that he isn’t falling for the trappings of worldly success. As he became aware of passing this second test, I am sure Jesus breathed a sigh of relief, feeling a little more like he understood what it meant to be the

Son of God.

But there was yet another test, another “I dare you!” Jesus is transported from that wilderness to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and offered the chance to test God and himself by cannon-balling off the spire and relying upon angels to rescue him. From the Holiest pinnacle of the Temple, that place that was closest to God, the pressure must have been unbearable for Jesus. And yet, rather than taking the bait, Jesus answered the test again with teachings from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy. Jesus simply says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And thus the devil-tester leaves him and slinks off until a more opportune time. When he returns it will be to test not Jesus, but Judas and Peter...and we know how that ends! And thus we know who Jesus is, and Jesus himself knows that he is capable of fulfilling his baptismal vows. Jesus knows he is worthy of the loving embrace of God, made known when God announces, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” His testing concluded Luke’s records that Jesus left the wilderness and went to the city of Galilee and dove head-long into his ministry of teaching and preaching.

Now the “I dare you’s” of this passage are unlike the “I dare you’s” I have generally come across. The “I dare you’s” I’ve seen in life and in legend have resulted in tongues stuck to frozen flag poles, water balloon attacks on unsuspecting parents, careers placed before family and faith, and consumerism run amok. In some ways the tests of our lives and the “I dare you’s” we hear are different from those that Jesus confronted. In our time and our context we have no devilish figure to test us. But, whether we extend our tongues toward the frozen flag pole or choose to place our ambition and love of earthly things above all else, the “I dare you’s” of our lives are indeed about loyalty—to ourselves, our faith, and our God. And that is why I sometimes wish we could have the type of experience that Jesus had when he wandered in the wilderness. Wouldn’t it be nice to have three tests and to know that if we could pass them we could be forever secure? Instead, we are confronted time and again with tests to our beliefs as we live our lives. Sometimes we are sure that we are getting it right, but there are those other times too, when we aren’t really sure if we are on the right track. Often when we do manage to somehow stumble toward just living, if we manage to put away our ego, our self-doubt, our confusion, even then we miss God’s grace and confuse it with plain ol’ dumb luck. And then there are those times when we just blow it, and we have all had plenty of those moments!

But what if we could find three bits of wisdom embedded in the trek that Jesus took into the wilderness? What if we could find a few things that would make it easier for us to walk away from the destructive “I dare you’s” of our lives and thus provide us ways to live more faithfully to our God and to ourselves? I think they are there, but not necessarily in the clear and concise ways that they were there for Jesus.

First, we remember that when Jesus was offered the chance to turn a stone into bread he simply said, “Man does not live by bread alone.” As I read this passage I cannot help but think that we need to hear this over and over because it is a reminder that too often we have believed that we can live on bread alone. Sure we add in proteins, vegetables, (a lot

of) cookies, some coffee etc. But as we feed our bodies I wonder how seriously we take the feeding of our souls? As Jesus answers his tests by recalling the ancient Jewish text, I am left to wonder if we could do the same? Sure, we always have a Bible at hand, on the internet, or even on our phone, but do we know the stories? Can we find our way through our book? Do we really take prayer seriously, or is it something we do on Sunday morning and leave here as we walk out of this worship space? Perhaps in the reverberations of that first test we should hear a call to deeper engagement with the Bible, with prayer, with silence, with meditation. Maybe we should hear the brilliant words of Jesus as a reminder to quit stuffing our faces and instead bring more life and more study into our living, so that we can be filled by more than what fills our pantry.

When Jesus was tested for the second time he was offered the chance to turn his back on God and worship the devil-tempter instead. Again, while Jesus had a clear choice to make, our choices about how and what to worship are not always so clear. It is far too easy, I think, to work hard, search out success, begin to find the payoff for our hard work, and still go astray. Not because our hard work is done with malice or with greedy intentions, but because our motivations and our desires change in incremental ways, causing us to embrace our culture's priorities rather than our own. Often it happens almost without notice, and then we end up worshiping not the God who molds us and shapes us, not the God who imparts astounding gifts into our hands and hearts, but we end up worshiping the gifts themselves, and they become like idols to us. Maybe the message we must find in the second test confronted by Jesus is to do a reality check—not on how we are living our lives, but why?

Finally, when Jesus was offered the chance to survey the kingdom and to leap from the highest point of the Temple he walked away from the power play that the devil offered him by simply refusing to test God. I wonder if we likewise don't need a reminder about testing God. But once again our testing is more nuanced than the testing that Jesus encountered. I suspect that most often when we test God we don't ask too much of God but, instead, ask too little. I suspect that we are too self-reliant for our own good, and that when we test God we do it in a way that makes God as small and as powerless as we can because we are convinced that we can handle it alone. We are a do-it-yourself people, and our self-assuredness is a wonderful gift. It is a gift that allows us to build things, create things, and do ministry together. But we cannot allow our do-it yourself nature to impede our reliance on and our relationship with God. Jesus was pretty clear about the power he held, and where it came from. I wonder if we are so humble? I suspect that our call in this part of the passage is toward developing a greater sense of when the spirit is moving in and through us. What if we are being called to be ever more diligent in giving credit to God and celebrating the breadth, depth, and the expanse of God? How can we show our thanksgiving to God, and let that wonder and awe fill our hearts and guide our lives? Can we allow God in and control our do-it yourself nature?

Perhaps our journey is as easy as three steps. Jesus walked into the wilderness to discover who he was, and thanks to a few well-placed "I dare you's" he returned from the wilderness to become Jesus the teacher, prophet, healer, and savior. His story is our story: we simply need to be courageous enough to make it our own. Do it, go ahead...I

dare you!

Thanks be to God! Amen.