

What God Assumed: The Wilderness Temptations
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

“This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him.” These were the last words we heard, spoken by a voice from out of a cloud on a mountain, at the end of the season of Epiphany, the season of looking for God’s light in the world.

“You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” These were the last words Jesus heard, spoken by a voice from heaven at his baptism, before he returned from the Jordan.

The next words Jesus hears and we hear are the words of the devil, spoken in the wilderness at the beginning of the season of Lent, the season of listening to Jesus and following him as he makes his way to the cross. But just as we needed the lens of Luke’s stories to help us see light, so we need the help of those who have listened to and followed Jesus before us in order to hear the words Jesus says and the word Jesus is. In particular, this morning, and as a preface to this Lenten series about “What God Assumed,” we turn for help to an early church father whose name was Gregory of Nazianzus.

Gregory was born in 329 A.D. and grew up in the region of Cappadocia. After a good liberal arts education--studying rhetoric, poetry, geometry and astronomy in Athens—he returned home at the age of 33 to be baptized by his father, the Bishop of Nazianzus, and to be ordained a priest against his will. Even so, Gregory became known as “the theologian” of the church. In 378, the council of bishops invited him to come to Constantinople, a city awash in theological controversy. For three centuries, the church had been trying to find words to say who Jesus was and what the Holy Spirit had to do with the church’s faith. In the late 4th century, councils convened to write creeds. At issue was whether Jesus was the most remarkable human being that ever lived, period, or had God really come to dwell with us in Jesus? Was the Holy Spirit simply any Spirit in the world that moved individuals inwardly, or was a spirit only God’s Spirit if it revealed the God already known in the Father and the Son?

As Archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory argued that if, on the one hand, Jesus were only a very, very, very good man, if God had not been in Christ, then the separation between human beings and God—that condition the church calls sin—remained. If, on the other hand, God in Christ assumed our human condition: our temptations, our rejection, our guilt, our lost estate, our (self) righteousness, our dereliction and death as God’s own, if he became completely one with us, then there is no place, including hell according to the creed, where God is not with us. In sum, Gregory said, “What has not been assumed, has not been healed...has not been redeemed,” has not been reconciled. The most jaw-dropping instance of Jesus’ assumption of our humanity is his cry of dereliction on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” According to Gregory, Jesus’ cry reflects not the absence of God in his suffering but rather God’s inclusion of our abandonment within God’s life, God’s saving embrace. [Christopher Beeley].

But we are getting way ahead of ourselves! One last word from Gregory will turn us toward Luke’s story of Jesus’ temptations: “So real is the Son’s assumption of our fallen human existence in the incarnation that when the Devil attacks Jesus,” Gregory says, “the devil unwittingly meets with God...” Luke’s story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is the story of the devil meeting the God who, in Christ, assumed the wilderness, the temptations that are part and parcel of our

being human. Or as the preacher to the Hebrews put it: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect as been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

Again, if the code book is not entirely lost to our memory, Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness calls to mind Moses’ forty days without food on the mountain, Elijah’s forty days running from God’s call and Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of testing, of threat, of crisis, of the seeming absence of God. In Scripture, wilderness places are where the forces that are hostile to God dwell. You do not need *me* to tell *you* that, because you have known such seasons, such places. Maybe even this season is a season when circumstances without or within have found you in the wilderness, in a place that tests the person you are and the person you are becoming, a place that threatens every sure foundation, a place where crisis has yet to seem like opportunity, a place where God is not and the forces hostile to God are all around. Maybe you are lost in the wilderness at the beginning of your life, not knowing what being human requires of you; or you have entered the wilderness in the middle of life, just when you thought you knew who you were and what was ahead; or you are dwelling in the wilderness at life’s end and being tested by the hostile forces of infirmity and weakness.

Yet the wilderness is where Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, is led by the Spirit. He is in the godforsaken place where you are losing and finding yourself so that the wilderness will never again be godforsaken. He has assumed the wilderness in which you dwell as his own.

Luke first says Jesus was famished, famished because when you are in the wilderness, food has no appeal and you literally or metaphorically begin wasting away--until the day comes when you wake to your own emptiness and vulnerability. On the fortieth day, the devil encounters Jesus in his human weakness and says, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Matthew mentions a field full of stones, suggesting that Jesus’ test has to do with feeding the multitudes. But in Luke, there is one stone. In the wilderness when we have wasted away to nothing, the test has to do with how we will fill our emptiness and with what. There are plenty of voices ready to prey upon our weakness and test us with quick fixes, empty calories, anesthetizing substances. Israel was ready to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt, you may remember. Assuming our wilderness as his own, Jesus simply reminds himself and the devil and you and me that bread alone is necessary but not sufficient to feed our famished souls. To quote the entire verse from Deuteronomy, “God humbled you by *letting* you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...*in order* to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Ask yourself what word from the Lord is hearable in the wilderness and nowhere else. Then listen to him.

Next the devil leads him to a place where, in an instant, he can see all the kingdoms of the world. The devil promises Jesus their glory and their authority immediately if Jesus will worship him. It is the sort of bargain you make when you are in a place of powerlessness and some powerful somebody makes you an offer you think you cannot refuse. “You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him shall you hold fast,” Jesus says to the devil. Luther says of this first commandment, “To have a God properly means to have something in which the heart trusts completely.” Part of what makes the wilderness a wilderness is that it is a place where, a season when everything else and everyone else we trusted is absent. Ask yourself if the wilderness and nowhere else is where your heart may, for the first time, trust God completely. Because God in Christ assumed completely the wilderness where you wander, with him in the wilderness you may trust God alone.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the temple, to the place of God's dwelling and refuge. The devil has now realized that Jesus lives by God's word, so he quotes Psalm 91, commanding him to test God's saving power but missing the fact that "the psalm is addressed to those who, through their fidelity to God, reside in God's presence" even and especially in suffering and danger. "Moreover," Joel Green notes, "the devil fails to recognize a deeper mystery, known already to the believing community of which Luke is a part, that divine rescue may come *through* suffering and death and not only *before* (and *from*) them." That is to say, because Jesus is on his way to assume our suffering and death in Jerusalem, he accompanies us in our every wilderness where, without him, we would be godforsaken. Therefore, Jesus says finally to the devil, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." For unwittingly in Jesus, the devil has met God.

On this first Sunday in Lent, especially if this season finds you in the wilderness, listen to him before you go any farther, saying, "You are my Son, my daughter, my beloved." "If you would enter/into the wilderness," Jan Richardson advises in her poem on our text, "do not begin/without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,

from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road

such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.

Thanks be to God!