

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
Lent 1A 2017
Matthew 4: 1-11
March 5, 2017

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear one of the versions of this story of Jesus being tempted. I feel like I know this story fairly well, and that over the years, I've read a lot of commentaries and reflections on it. So, this year I did something a little different in my sermon preparation. I watched a movie—from a number of years ago—called “The Devil’s Advocate.” The idea came from a conversation last week with a church member—we were talking about temptation and how it’s subtle and slippery and how before you know it you’re down a path you never wanted to be on.

In *The Devil’s Advocate*, the devil is the head of a high-powered, unscrupulous law firm in New York. The movie is about his efforts to lure a talented lawyer in—and bring him over to the dark side. There’s a fair amount of horror and blood—I could never watch this movie at night. But it’s also pretty thought-provoking. And what it helped me get into was the struggle that was going on between Satan and Jesus.

I feel the power in this story which starts out with the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness immediately after his baptism. There’s virtually no time to bask in the moment of the heavens opening up and the voice proclaiming: “This is my beloved Son with whom I am so pleased.”

Because before you can catch your breath, the Spirit whisks Jesus away to the wilderness—the place of preparation—for the purpose of being tempted by Satan.

Already what’s going on is hard to understand—why is the Spirit leading Jesus into temptation? The Greek word that’s used can mean either testing or temptation. I’m not sure testing is a whole lot better than tempting. And in some ways both are kind of an assessment of what you are made of.

In my book, Jesus has just come through a huge test already by not eating for 40 days. He is no doubt feeling his humanness. He’s hungry and feeling his frailty—and that’s apparently when Satan starts talking to him. And what I notice is how Satan really knows what might get to Jesus—he’s inside his head.

Starting with bread is an obvious temptation but the tricky part comes with how he toys with Jesus’s identity. “*If* you are the Son of God, strut your stuff. Show your power. Do something that will make a difference—not just for you—but for others who are hungry.”

How appealing this sounds—especially compared to the test that has come from God which looks like seeing just how weak and hungry you can feel. You can feel the pull of Satan, to make Jesus question what it means to be loved by God—to make him doubt himself and wonder about whether he really is who God says he is.

Listening is our theme during Lent. This story shows just how hard it is to listen to God. There are so many voices inside our heads—as well as in the world around us—voices that clamor for our attention and talk so loud *at us*, that sometimes we can barely hear God speak.

Satan was hell-bent on getting Jesus to *prove* who he was. Prove you are the Son of God by making stones into bread. Prove you are the Son of God by jumping off the top of the temple and having the angels rescue you.

Satan is making a good case—after all, if you’re God’s Son wouldn’t you have special powers? If the heavens opened up and you heard God saying you’re my child and I love you, it goes to reason that you could expect some more dramatic displays of that kind of power. Satan knows what is going on in Jesus’s head. He knows the doubt that can creep into the best of us.

This struggle that Jesus faces—doubting who he is—at his very core—is the essential human struggle we all face to one degree or another. God has said to each of us: “You are my *beloved* child. I am so happy with who you are.” Instead of that word being the defining word about who we are, all these other voices attempt to drown out that word. Our great temptation is to listen to these other voices that cause us to question our status as beloved sons and daughters of God.

This struggle goes back a long, long time. In the creation story, God pronounces everything that God has created good. Including human beings. People are created in God’s image and God looks at them and says not just “good” but *very good*.

But, I look around and I see how we have such a hard time believing *that* word of God. I’m wondering if our original sin is that we judge ourselves as “not good” or “not good enough”. We look at ourselves—we turn in on ourselves—and we evaluate and we measure and we compare. And all we hear are the voices inside our head that say there’s something wrong—or *lots* of things wrong with us.

We don’t believe God when God says: “you are very good.” When God says, “This is my beloved child and I am pleased,” it’s almost as if we don’t think God could possibly be saying that about *us*.

And we get into that same struggle Jesus did with Satan. We get this idea that we have to prove we’re worthy of being called God’s child. And we head down that impossible path of trying to be hard-working enough, kind enough, generous enough and loving enough that God really would be proud to call us, “Son or Daughter.” We’re so caught up in responding to all those voices that tell us we’ve got to prove ourselves, that we can’t even hear God say, “I love you.”

One of the classic names for Satan is the *Father of Lies*. The reasoning *seems* sound. “You really shouldn’t think so much of yourself.” “Humility is the virtue.”

But maybe our biggest problem is that we don’t listen to *God*—that we substitute our self-evaluation for God’s assessment of us. Maybe this is our arrogance—our root arrogance—that we think we know more about who we are than God does. We think *about* ourselves all the time—at times, we obsess about ourselves. But the heart of our problem is that we do not

think *enough* of ourselves. We don't take in what God is saying: "You are my child and you are *very good*."

Father Gregory Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries, a gang-intervention program in East Los Angeles, the gang capital of the world. Here the voices telling you who you are are loud and the consequences of listening to them are matters of life and death.

Willy is a peripheral gang member who's more of a talker than anything else. He's got some charm and one night he's convinced Father Gregory to give him \$20 for food. But they've got to go to the ATM at a nearby convenience store to get the cash. They're in the territory of a rival gang, so Father Gregory tells him to stay in the car. Willy wants the keys to be able to listen to the radio but Gregory tells him to pray. Willy rolls his eyes at him but he gives in and folds his hands.

When Father Gregory gets back to the car, he can tell that something is different. Willy is reflective and peaceful.

"You prayed didn't you."

"Yeah, I did."

"Well, what did God say to you?"

"Well, first he said: *Shut up and listen*."

"So, what'd ya do?"

"Come on, G, what am I sposed ta do? I shut up and listened."

Willy is quiet, not bragging or trying to convince Father Gregory of anything.

After a while, Gregory asks, "Son, tell me, how do you see God?"

"God? That's my dog right there."

(In gang language, *dog* is the one you can rely on, the one who's got your back.)

"And God? How does God see you?"

Willy takes a minute to answer. And then, with a tear running down his cheek, he says: "God. . . thinks. . . I'm. . . *firme*."

In gang speak, *firme* mean "could not be one bit better."

That's what God is saying to each one of us. May we shut up and listen.

Amen.