



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

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THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

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Let us pray: Gracious God, our fortress, the struggle between good and evil rages within and around us and the devil tempts us with empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word. And renew us in our baptismal identity that the wicked one have no power over us; through Christ, alone the Savior. Amen.

How would you answer the question: who are you? Perhaps, you would mention your name, age, and where you live. Beyond that, though, you might begin identifying yourself in terms of the relationships in your life: the person to whom you're married, the children for whom you are a parent, those with whom you work or who are your friends. Our identity is firmly rooted in our relationships. Pretty much everything I might say about myself involves others. In describing ourselves, though, I wonder how long it would take us before we said we were created by God, redeemed by Jesus, a member of the family of faith, with sisters and brothers in Christ? I got weepy the other night when I began thinking about just how much my identity has become rooted in, and connected to, this congregation, with each of you. My relationships here, precious connections, have enriched my personhood and brought deeper meaning to my life. For this is a welcoming and compassionate fellowship, where we celebrate diversity, yet are united in the Spirit; where the dignity of every member and every visitor is affirmed. Here we truly care about one another. That's what real community is!

I speak of identity this morning because I believe it is key to understanding these two stories of temptation in Genesis and Matthew. Notice that the serpent tempts Adam and Eve, and let's be crystal clear, both of them are present and responsible for succumbing to the tempter, the serpent tempts Adam and Eve to be their own person, that is, to create their own identity, independent of God and the relationship God, their Creator, has established with them. "When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...", the tempter promises. Golly, who needs God, after all, when you can be "like god," all on your own? So Adam and Eve sin by separating and divorcing their identity from God.

And then Matthew! While the content of the devil's temptations includes turning stones to bread, testing God's protection, and the fake promise of power, dominion, and glory these three temptations are, first and foremost, about Jesus' identity. The devil begins by calling into question the identity Jesus had just been given by God at his baptism in the previous scene, the divine voice declaring: "This is my beloved Son!" So, the devil's first words to Jesus are: "If you are the Son of God," seeking to rob Jesus of the identity God the Father had just given him. The devil seeks to undermine Jesus' relationship with his Father in tempting Jesus to test it by throwing himself off the temple's pinnacle, by going his own way by providing food for himself, and by looking to the devil for protection and patronage rather than trusting in God.

Jesus, though, resists each temptation, not through an act of brute force, but by declaring and affirming his identity and solidarity with God, his Father, responding to each temptation with the antidote that is God's word, the power from Scripture. "One lives not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Again, "do not put God to the test." And finally, "worship the Lord your God, and serve only him!" Jesus turns back

each temptation not only by quoting Scripture, but specifically quotes Scriptures which speak of the trustworthiness of God, the need to depend on God for all good things, and of God's sure promise to care for him and all God's children. In the temptations which assault us constantly, may we take solace in the fact that Christ Jesus faced all manner of temptation as we do, and is with us in our every wilderness where temptations assail us, and as we remain strong in our identity as God's very own, God's beloved, we are better able to resist each temptation in the power of God's Spirit within us. And when we fail God's amazing grace forgives us.

The 17th century French philosopher, Pascal, described our human condition as having a hole, what Pascal called a God-shaped hole. We are insufficient, incomplete, not finally happy, and life does not have ultimate meaning and purpose, until that God-shaped hole is filled. Here I would tweak Pascal a bit, and would call the hole a cross-shaped hole. For too many people the hole is shaped like a new car or computer, a better house, clinging to youth, or having the perfect spouse. But, there is no ultimate filling of that hole except in and through our relationship with God, the God who gives us our essential and ultimate identity, child of God, Christ's sister or brother. St. Augustine said it best, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O God." The God we see in the face of Christ, and his cross to which this Lent leads us, alone can fill that cross-shaped hole within us!

Traditionally during these days of Lent Christians give up something, a Lenten fast, like chocolate, alcohol, meat, the list is long, to abstain, to practice self-denial as a way, albeit small, of reminding ourselves of the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Ash Wednesday I suggested two Lenten resolutions. First, that we take ten minutes each day in Lent to pray in silence, with absolutely no distractions. To pray for our personal needs, yes, but also to remember the needs of relatives and friends, and also world problems, and even praying for those from whom we are estranged. Also, to reflect and focus on the blessings in our life and to praise and thank God for them in prayer. Even more, how about taking a notebook and begin a daily gratitude journal, writing down what is good, and right, and happy in our life. For gratitude is a wonderful corrective to feelings of anger and fear and depression. Making more room for gratitude in our consciousness is an important practice, most especially in these times.

The second resolution to which I invite you is, if you are giving up something for Lent, eating out, beer, movies, desserts, that you calculate the money you are saving over Lent's six weeks and on Easter Sunday write a check for St. John's Outreach Fund, in order that our vital ministries of compassion and help might not only continue, but expand. In this way, we are not only giving something up, but taking something on, the ministry of love, the love of our Lord, who came not to be served, but to serve. Through worship, prayer, Bible study, self-denial, and compassionate service, we deepen and strengthen our identity as God's very own, and the more likely we will be able to resist the temptations which daily assault us.

Our identity comes from those with whom we are in relationship, those with whom we hang out. That's why we gather Sunday after Sunday, not to be disrespectful, to hang out with Jesus, who continually tells us we are infinitely precious in his sight. Also, to hang out with one another, that our cross-shaped identity and faith might be made more secure and be strengthened.

There is a legend which holds that Satan again tempted Jesus, one last time, as the Savior hung in excruciating pain and horrible agony on the cross. There, Satan whispered in Jesus' ear: "They aren't worth it, Jesus. They are so not worth it, come down from the cross." But, at that moment, the legend says, Jesus uttered the words, "Father, forgive them!" Yes, Jesus deemed you and I worth it all! It is this identity over which the devil and every temptation have no final power! "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have everlasting life!" We know finally who we are, when we know whose we are!

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.