

“We Trust in Jesus Christ”
delivered Sunday, February 21, 2010
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Luke 4:1-13
1st in 4 Part Series on A Brief Statement of Faith

The season of Lent always begins in the desert. After he’s washed in the waters of baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit of God into the desert, that dry and barren place, to prepare himself for the life and ministry that lies ahead. His forty days in the wilderness recall the forty years of ancient Israel, between their deliverance from slavery and their settling into the Promised Land. As it was for Israel way back then, so it is for Jesus, a time of testing. When the people of Israel thought they were dying of thirst God made water flow from a rock. When they thought they would die of hunger, God sent manna from heaven – just enough for each day, daily bread. When they needed help finding their way, God sent a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When they forgot about God and created the Golden Calf to worship so that they would be like other nations and have a god they could carry around, God had to remind them who and whose they were. For forty years, every doubt filled turn in their wilderness wanderings was answered by God.

So when we get to Jesus’ time of being tested in the wilderness there is a striking parallel. His temptations are basically the same as the devil peppers him with questions, asking him to rely on his own divine power and to forget that God is God, that God will provide what he needs, and that God alone is worthy of worship. But there is also a striking difference between the wilderness time for ancient Israel and for Jesus. When Israel is tempted to deny the presence and power of God – God shows up out there in the desert and responds to them with outward signs that they can see and taste and touch. When Jesus is tempted to deny who he really is – God shows up within him and he himself affirms who he is... fully human, fully God.

As my preacher friend, Doug King, comments on this text says, “Jesus refuses to put his power to work on the problem of his rumbling belly. Instead he strengthens himself quoting words of Deuteronomy and a reminder to the devil and possibly himself that he is dependent upon God –even as he is God...He is not a messiah who will take care of his own physical needs with his power. He is not a messiah who will seek out the authority and glory of the world. He is not a messiah who will protect himself from the dangers of the world. Jesus will not use his power the ways in which we would mostly likely use it, were it ours.” (1) Perhaps from our mortal perspective all exploration into God’s identity begins with the divine not. When the devil says to Jesus, “If you are... then...the devil is tempting Jesus to be the God he is not. He will not be the Savior we sometimes think we want – a sort of magical miracle worker. Rather, he will remain true to his divine vocation and be the Savior we ultimately need – a God so human that he will suffer and die a very human death. The old mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, ‘God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction.’” (2)

Therefore with the devils’ temptation and what Jesus refuses to do, the slate is clean for us to learn who he really is as we journey toward the cross in the weeks to come – fully human, fully God. Of all the doctrines of our Christian faith, this one may be among the hardest to wrap our heads around – how can Jesus be fully human... and fully God? I think that is what the Apostle Paul was trying to explain when he wrote, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,

nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What he meant is – we cannot be separated from a love that shares our flesh and blood, a love that in Christ is so close it is under our skin. Fully human, fully God.

Falling on Christian ears, it sounds so obvious, doesn't it? After all, this is what we say we believe about Jesus. But we affirm this belief amid a culture that sometimes seems to have reduced Jesus to something other than fully human, fully God. United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon, put it this way: “The gospel presents a real challenge for us. Here is how I would describe that challenge: The contemporary North American Church has succeeded in sentimentalizing Jesus to the point where we have taken the romantic ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ of the 19th century and reworked it into Jesus – our good friend, our buddy, our therapist who always affirms and never criticizes, always blesses and never curses.” (3) But Jesus is more unsettling than that.... “Jesus will not be tempted to be the Savior we thought we wanted.” (4)

You see, when the devil is testing Jesus in the wilderness, asking him to do a little hocus pocus over the stone to turn it into a loaf of bread, to feed his starving stomach after a forty day fast, and to dive head first off the top of the Temple to see if God's angels will catch him, the devil may as well be suggesting he find a way around the cross that awaits him in Jerusalem. He might as well have been saying, “If you can do *this* now, you might as well avoid *that* later.” But Jesus will not go around his own suffering and death, any more than God is willing to go around us in our suffering and death. Fully human – means Jesus suffers as we suffer and dies as we die. Fully God – means nothing, absolutely nothing – no whining in the wilderness, no bold act of disobedience, no sin we commit, no cancer, no lost job, no earthquake, no death – nothing – will separate us from God's love. My preacher friend Jon Walton said it simply: “Only a God who knows our suffering can take it to himself. Only a God who has experienced the sorrow of our life can take us to its joy.” (4)

In Frederick Buechner's book, *The Eyes of the Heart*, he tells the story about the last conversation he had with his brother, Jamie. Buechner is a Presbyterian minister, a thoughtful writer and theologian who lives in Vermont and doesn't travel often away from home. His brother Jamie claimed little faith, never went to church, lived in New York, and as he was dying they talked on the phone. Buechner describes the conversation as one of hesitancy as much as expression, as such calls are between brothers who have not exactly mastered the art of telling one another what is most in their heart. And also the strangeness of knowing that this call would be the last one made, and these words the last words spoken. “You have been a wonderful brother,” Jamie said to Fred. And Buechner in turn said he had a feeling they had not seen the last of one another. “Jamie made a soft, descending, ‘Ah-h-h’ sound as a way to thank me for saying it, for maybe even believing it,” wrote Buechner, “and he didn't want a funeral, he told me – too much like a direct question I suppose – but when I suggested maybe cocktails and dinner with some of his old friends in the fall....He said that sounded like a good idea. But he did ask me if I would write a prayer for him that he could use, and my son-in-law David said that he had it there on the table beside him when he died. “Dear Lord, bring me through the darkness into light. Bring me through pain into peace. Bring me through death into life. Be with me wherever I go, and with everyone I love. In Christ's name, I ask it...” (5)

That prayer is what it means to say “We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human..... fully God.” God brings us through darkness into light, through pain into peace, through death into life. Not because we deserve any of it. But simply for the love of God. Amen.

NOTES

- 1) Doug King, Moveable Feast paper 2007.
- 2) King again.
- 3) Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Jan.-March, 2010, p. 41-42.
- 4) Willimon, p. 35.
Jon Walton, "No Evil Shall Befall You," 2/29/04, First Presbyterian Church, New York City.
- 5) Frederick Buechner, *The Eyes of the Heart*, p. 162 ff, also used in Walton's sermon.