

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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February 21, 2010

Staring the Devil Down

Luke 4:1-13 • First Sunday in Lent

A recent TV advertisement pictured children in a US classroom and children in a Japanese classroom all gathered around a computer monitor. Two of the boys, one Japanese and one American, were staring at each other in the cameras on each monitor. There was an extended period of silence. Then the American boy blinked. All the kids in the Japanese classroom erupted into celebration, while the children in the American classroom consoled their champion who had blinked first. It was a clever ad that brought back memories of childhood competitions. Perhaps you remember staring someone down as well.

Well today's Scripture portrays Jesus and Satan in a stare-down! If it were just an ordinary contest we might be amused as I was watching that TV ad. However, it's anything but an ordinary tale! Something here speaks of our own experience. We know the Tempter's power. How hard it is to stare the devil down. Oh we may know the joy of beating back temptation sometimes. More often than not, I'll wager, we know the guilt of blinking first. You don't have to watch Tiger on TV to remember the anguish of having to apologize for your own misdeeds. Something in this story of temptation fascinates us. Perhaps listening in on Jesus' encounter with the Devil will give us perspective. Imagine the headline: Spirit throws Jesus out into the Wilderness!

What? That's not the headline you expected? You thought Jesus volunteered for that confrontation? Read the story again. Luke says the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Mark says the Spirit threw him out into the wilderness. Pushed, shoved, threw, as if Jesus wasn't all too eager to go. Interesting! Every story has several points of view in it, some more subtle than others. What's with this Spirit of God, anyway? Why would the Spirit send Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? That hardly seems like God's Spirit to us. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit announced: "This is my Son, my beloved; my favor rests on him." Now that same Spirit is shoving him into the wilderness! Fascinating!

It's easy to focus on the two main characters, Jesus and Satan. Now take note of the third character in the drama. The Spirit fades into the background, but has he withdrawn completely? Or like the children in that classroom watching their classmates in a stare-down, did the Spirit stick around to see what happened? Is God a disinterested observer? Or does God have a stake in the outcome? Come to think of it, are we disinterested observers? Or do we have a stake in this contest?

Have you ever wondered what might happen if Jesus blinked, if he lost the contest? It's not like God can start over, you know. This is the Son with whom God is pleased. This temptation is critical! We usually see only two characters in this story. Take note now of the third. God's the one with everything to lose. If Jesus blinks, it's all over. Yet God doesn't dare control the outcome. Like the children in the classroom, he's chosen his champion. Now it's up to Jesus to handle it alone.

Remember a time when you had to choose between helping your child or letting her deal with the situation alone? Or remember watching your child go out into the world on his own? A friend of mine described leaving his Down Syndrome daughter in a group home for the first time: "Karna was so enthused about her new home. She was watching TV in her room when I had to leave. I had to ask for a goodbye hug. She didn't realize that I felt I was leaving part of myself behind. All those years of taking care of her, loving her, making sure she was safe. It was so hard for me to let go!"

Or remember a time when you were the one on your own. Maybe you were a child looking for your Mother or Father when you realized no one was there to help. Even more challenging, maybe you were within arms length of your parents, but neither one would lift a finger to help. They knew you needed to stand on your own. Remember how it felt? In some ways it was exhilarating. In other ways it was frightening. But at some point in life everyone has to face a trial alone. So lump in your throat you set out on your own. At other times, everyone has to let someone else face a trial alone. So lump in your throat you stood back and watched, unable to help because to help was the wrong thing to do.

Sometimes God seems far away, watching us struggle, but doing nothing. That's contrary to our expectations. We want God to come to our aid in times of need. Or am I the only one around here who prays best when trouble's brewing? We expect God to act in predictable ways. And when God doesn't do what we expect, we get upset. We wonder, "What did I do wrong? Why is God letting this happen to me?" Or, "What's the use of believing in God? Doesn't do any good anyhow."

Notice how Jesus handled the same experience? Can't help but marvel at him. Jesus trusted God even when the Spirit abandoned him in the wilderness to be tested. Satan, on the other hand, told him that God shouldn't do that. "Look at you," he says. "God has let you starve these forty days. Never even dropped a bit of manna for you to taste. Why, if you're really God's Son, would God treat you that way? If you're the Son of God, you can turn these stones into bread. Go ahead, take care of yourself."

The other two temptations are different, not focused on taking care of self. But the question's the same. Is Jesus going to trust God who is depending on him to handle the situation? Is Jesus going to believe the promises of Scripture even when hunger pangs complain that Scripture is just words? "Look!" Satan says. "I got the power. That's why the Spirit led you out here in the first place. Team up with me and we can fix this world up right." All people need is something concrete to cling to. Look I'll prove it to you. Just jump off this high place. The angels will make sure you don't get hurt. Then the people will know you're God's son. They'll follow you anywhere. Or are you afraid? Don't you trust God to keep his promise to rescue you?

Who's in charge here, anyway? Our faith tells us God is. But, God has chosen to trust a human with the future of the creation. Let me say that again. God has chosen to trust humans with the future. That may be a sobering thought. But it seems to me that the issue decided in the wilderness was that humans can be trusted. No, not just any human, for on our own we're too much like Adam and Eve. But humans who are united with Christ can be trusted. Jesus passed the test. Like the kids in the classroom cheering their champion, we win if he wins. Christ in us makes us capable of being faithful. Some things we simply must do for ourselves. Does that mean God has abandoned us? No. Does it mean God has no stake in the outcome? No. It means that in Christ, God trusts us to be faithful.

Notice what being faithful means. It means trusting God even when God seems absent. Temptation isn't a battle of strength, one powerful wrestler pinning the other to the mat. Jesus doesn't overpower Satan. Neither Jesus nor Satan blinked. The issue for us isn't whether we'll beat back the Tempter when we meet up with him. He's too strong for us. The issue is whether we'll trust God even when God seems to be unavailable. Temptation's a test of faith. Here Jesus trusts God even when God doesn't come to his rescue. He did the same on the cross. Remember? What kind of God lets his only Son suffer and die? What kind of God lets his people suffer and die? It's a question we hear often. Jesus responds simply, there's more to life than bread . . . More to life than the quick fix. . . Trust God and don't put the Lord to the test . . . Worship the Lord your God and serve him alone . . . Cling to God's promises even in the darkest of times.

Satan proposed the quick fix, the dramatic display, the use of force to accomplish good things. Each suggestion he made was an end that seemed to justify the means. But the means to the end were contrary to God's will. Who could argue with betraying a sacred trust just to take care of yourself? "One does not live by bread alone," Jesus reminds us. Who can argue with having the power to change the world? But Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your

God and serve only him.” Who can resist making a demonstration to impress friend and foe alike? Yet Jesus says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” How easily we fall prey to the proposed quick fix, the misuse of power, the temptation to trust our way. But who wins the struggle for our soul when we depart from God’s way?

Real power belongs to God who refuses to use it the way we want. We have a lot to learn. Thank God it isn’t all up to us. That’s the really good news. Christ’s victory is ours. We’re called to a new way of life. There are times of testing ahead for all of us, just as there were for Jesus. Unlike Jesus we don’t face them alone. Not as alone as he was, anyway. No, God isn’t going to bail us out. We still have to stare the Devil down. But God has given us a companion for the way. And God trusts us to live in that way faithfully. We can you know. In Christ, we can.