

## Led by the Spirit

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Nancy Hoerner at Allwood Community Church, February 17, 2013*

### THE GOSPEL LESSON

#### Luke 4:1-14

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. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.

There's a hymn I wanted to sing today, but it didn't make the cut. The tune has the right mood for the first Sunday in Lent. The words appear to match perfectly with the gospel lesson from Luke, the story of Jesus in the wilderness.

Even though I decided not to make it one of today's hymns, I'd still like to sing it. Let's sing the first verse of Hymn 80, Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley. Please remain seated.

Jesus walked this lonesome valley.  
He had to walk it by Himself;  
O, nobody else could walk it for Him,  
He had to walk it by Himself.

It's lovely, isn't it? The sad, haunting notes of that American spiritual fit the occasion and mood of Jesus spending 40 days in the desert.

But unfortunately, Biblically, the sentiment is incorrect. Well, maybe the part about "nobody else could walk it for him" is true. But the rest is not. It didn't make the hymn cut because of the first line of today's gospel lesson: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness."

Jesus wasn't alone. He was accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

Just before this scene in the desert, Jesus is at the River Jordan being baptized by John. "When Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness."

Jesus isn't alone in the wilderness. But he is fully human, and prone to that very human feeling that God isn't there even while intellectually knowing full well that God is always there. It's entirely possible Jesus felt like he was walking that valley all by his lonesome. Fully human, he was hungry. After more than four weeks of eating nothing at all, he was literally starving.

That's enough to make anyone feel abandoned and alone.

After just a few days without eating anything at all, any of us would be tired, grumpy, apt to forget God's presence, and left open and vulnerable to devilish temptations. Now, you might argue that Jesus is God after all, and therefore had divine superpowers to help him stand up to the tests put before him. Preaching professor Scott Hoezee argues he does not, and puts it this way: "Many of us grew up with the tacit assumption that, of course Jesus could not have sinned. There had to be some divine failsafe built into his humanity that would have snapped and locked into place had Jesus' human side so much as wavered under the searing heat of a temptation. The divine nature would have overwhelmed the human at that point to prevent disaster."

But it didn't. Jesus, his fully human self in the desert, had no special powers that aren't equally accessible to you or me or any other human being.

Jesus wasn't alone. He was led by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus got hungry and vulnerable just like we do when we don't eat for an extended period of time. Jesus got tempted by the promise of earthly success just like we do when fame and fortune beckon. Jesus got drawn into a scriptural proof-texting session with the devil and never once mentioned the good news of the gospel, just like we do when we are trying to win arguments with scientists, humanists, atheists, Pentecostals and anyone else who thinks about the Bible differently than we do.

But Jesus knew, just like we know, that quoting Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone," is not exactly a helpful response to someone who is hungry. Believing the devil who says "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," is not going to help someone about to throw themselves from a pinnacle.

Jesus knew better than the devil did what the purpose of the Bible is. Scott Hoezee describes it as Jesus knowing "that Scripture is God's long love letter to his creation and that the purpose of Scripture is to nurture a loving, committed relationship with God." I know that. You know that.

But we are human, and therefore prone to forget that. Jesus was human too, and therefore prone to forget. But he stood up to the tests put before him. They were powerfully big temptations, and he resisted. The devil did the devil's best, giving Jesus the full temptation treatment, and Jesus did not give in. That means Jesus knew full well the power of the earthly temptations we face each day of our lives. He knows just how much strength and courage it takes to outwit the devil when we are feeling hungry and alone.

The passage ends with: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

The testing of Jesus the human being didn't end when the forty days were over. The devil's work is never done, and each day of his life, Jesus faced down the devil. Just like us.

Every time he tried to explain that his kingdom is the kingdom of heaven, he had to face the disappointment of those who were looking for a real king who would challenge Caesar's power. Every time he explained how to enter God's kingdom, he had to face the fact that most people were looking for an easier way that he couldn't promise. Every time he saw hunger, oppression, illness, fear, or death, he couldn't wave his magic God wand and have it all go away. He had to gather his strength and all his charismatic persuasiveness to figure out yet another way to teach his fellow human beings to put God's law above all other laws: to love God and love their neighbors as themselves. He had to be fully human and choose the difficult way of God, not the easy way out the devil offered.

I added a bit to the lectionary reading of the gospel today. The lectionary would have us end with the verse where the devil departs to wait for an opportune time. I added the next verse because I think it's essential to the story. Jesus went to Galilee, "filled with the power of the Spirit."

I subscribe to a daily e-mail that gathers the thoughts of women preachers. Yesterday's e-mail challenged us to write a six-word gospel based on this passage from Luke. They came up with:

"Desert hazing by Evil; passed test, "and "For the Love of God, 'No!'"

At first, I didn't think I could do it, but then, thinking about how I added that last verse, it came to me. Here's mine: Spirit led, Spirit fed, Spirit wed.

Those are the three parts to the story. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Spirit led. In the wilderness, the spirit fed Jesus to the point where he had the strength to face down the devil. Spirit fed. When Jesus left the wilderness, his human spirit and the Holy Spirit were united and he was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Spirit wed.

Since the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time, we have to assume that the devil awaits us too. But here's the good news contained in this story. From the moment of his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and through it all, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was never alone, never left without a source of strength. The Holy Spirit led him, fed him, and filled him, and Jesus came through his trial wedded to the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the fully human Jesus, not the fully divine Jesus. That means we too can call upon the power of the Holy Spirit as we face the challenges and choices of our daily lives. It means that the valley we walk through isn't quite as lonesome as it might feel. Nobody can walk it for us, but we don't have to walk it by ourselves. We walk it led and fed by the Holy Spirit.

As the devil lurks, waiting for an opportune time, may you be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.