

**“What to Do When All Hell Breaks Loose“**

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## Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup> you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup> You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” <sup>4</sup> When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup> you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup> we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup> and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup> Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

## Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written,  
     ‘Worship the Lord your God,  
     and serve only him.’”

<sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> for it is written,  
     ‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
     to protect you,’

<sup>11</sup> and  
     ‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
     so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

## SPIRITUAL CONFLICT

When we say the Apostle’s Creed in this church we use the traditional version. We say that Jesus was “crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell...” That word translated hell is the Greek word “hades”, a name that applies not only to hell but also the place of the dead. The ecumenical version of the Creed translates it that way, “He descended to the dead.”

That is a possible translation, but why would this Creed, which tries to pack so much in just a few sentences, repeat itself on this point.

I would contend that the traditional translation may be the correct one, because in the Bible and especially in the gospel of Luke,

the ministry of Jesus is portrayed as a spiritual battle.

Jesus was not just in conflict with corrupt political and religious leaders. Jesus was in conflict with evil itself.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians wrote that our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”. Our job is resist the “wiles of the devil” and resist temptation when the “evil day” comes.

The apostle tells us that the way we resist such evil is to put on the whole armor of God. I suspect that many of you are familiar with this passage that talks about the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation and finally, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. (Ephesians 6:10-17)

## AN EXAMPLE FROM LUKE

Today’s lesson from Luke is a good example of how this works. The Scripture is very clear. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil.

We can’t make this lesson into a tame little story about giving up brownies for Lent.

This story is cosmic in scope. This is Jesus confronting evil, the spiritual forces in the heavenly places. This is a story about the temptation that occurs when all hell breaks loose.

That’s literally what happens in this passage.

Yes, as the Creed teaches us, Jesus faced down the powers of hell in his death and resurrection. But, that final act was not his first encounter with evil.

Jesus faced this same adversary at the beginning of his ministry, in the wilderness, alone.

Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness?  
What does this story mean?

I think the key to understanding many of the stories in the New Testament is to compare them to stories from the Old Testament. Where else do you hear about temptation in the wilderness? The Israelites after they escape from Egypt.

The Israelites weren't in the wilderness for 40 days. They were in the wilderness for forty years. And that time in the wilderness was a time of temptation. They were tempted to doubt the goodness of God.

They said, "If God loves us so much, why has God put us in this godforsaken wilderness? We're starving. At least when we were slaves in Egypt, we had something to eat!"

God's people succumbed to their hunger.

In the same way Jesus, after 40 days, is tempted by his hunger. He is famished.

As the devil put it, "Since you're the Son of God, why not turn that stone into a loaf of bread?"

## A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

The passages that precede our lesson for today are about the identity of Jesus.

First, we learn that though people thought John the Baptist might be the Messiah, that hope was dashed when Herod had him thrown in jail. So who is the Messiah?

We learn the answer to that question in the very next passage. Jesus is baptized. The Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove. And a voice from heaven proclaims,

"You are my Son, the Beloved.  
With you I am well pleased."

And then in Luke's gospel we have the genealogy of Jesus traced through Joseph, who was thought to be Jesus' father. But, we learn that's not really true.

Jesus' lineage is traced all the way back to Adam, the first man whose true father was God.

The meaning is clear. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. That identity was confirmed by his lineage, the Spirit and the voice from heaven.

But, how can you believe such a claim when you find yourself in the wilderness and are starving? This was the very same temptation that God's people faced in the wilderness.

"If we're God's chosen people, what have we been chosen for?...to die in the wilderness of starvation?"

This was also Jesus' temptation. He was tempted to doubt his identity.

Did God really say that you were his Son?

Well, if that's true, why are you so hungry? Turn those stones into bread.

Remember this is a spiritual battle. We cannot fill a spiritual need with food. As I've said before, all of us have a hunger that even the blue plate special can't satisfy.

And that's how Jesus answers this temptation. Quoting Scripture he says,

"One does not live by bread alone."

There are three temptations in this passage, but in a sense they are the same temptation presented in different ways.

All of the temptations have to do with Jesus' identity.

Yes, Jesus is the Son of God.

But, how will he fulfill that destiny?  
What does that mean?

## THE DEVIL'S DEFINITION

The devil tries to define what it means to be the Son of God on his terms.

According to the evil one,  
the Son of God is always a winner.

The Son of God brings material blessings.  
Bread on command.

“You can do it Jesus. You’re the Son of God.”

In the second temptation, the devil suggests that the Son of God wins every battle.

The devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says,

“You can conquer these kingdoms.  
Just do it my way. Sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.

You can do it Jesus. You’re the Son of God.”

Again, Jesus answers with a quote from Scripture.  
In essence he said, “I’m the Son of God and not the son of the devil.

How we do things is as important as what we accomplish.

The Bible says, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

The evil one has one more temptation up his sleeve.  
And in this temptation the devil quotes Scripture.  
He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and says,

“Since you’re the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.

After all, the Good Book says, ‘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.’”

Now the devil was right.  
Psalm 91 does say that.

But, does it disturb you just a little bit that the devil is quoting Scripture?

Scripture can be used to bolster our faith, but apparently it can also be used to trick us into adopting an action or a way of life that is not in sync with God’s will.

The devil said,

“You can do it Jesus. You’re the Son of God.  
Jump. He’ll catch you!”

Jesus, of course, didn’t fall for this one either.  
He said, “And the Bible also says,  
‘Don’t put God to the test.’”

This ends the time of testing in the wilderness.  
But, there is more to come.  
Luke tells us, “The devil left, but he would come back at a more opportune time.”

We know about that.  
After all, this is the first Sunday of Lent, and once again we’re on the way to the cross.

That will be an opportune time for temptation if ever there was one.

So what about us?  
Are there times when we are more likely to be tempted. Is there an opportune time for the devil in our life?

## HIS TEMPTATION AND OURS

In a way the temptations of Jesus are not like ours.  
He was the Son of God, and we are not.

But, there are also some similarities.  
Jesus was tempted to deny his true identity.  
Jesus was tempted to adopt the ways of the world instead of God's ways

And we are faced with the same temptation.

Jesus didn't succumb to that temptation.  
Unfortunately we often do succumb to that temptation.

We doubt our true identity.  
We doubt that we are claimed by God.  
We doubt that we are God's beloved child.

And that's when all hell breaks loose.  
That's when things begin to fall apart.

That's when we are controlled by our hungers and our desires.

That's when we are hoodwinked by those who selectively quote the Bible  
and lead us astray.

That's when we think that if we aren't winning, if we don't get our way, then  
there's something wrong with us or the faith we profess.

How can we keep this from happening?  
What is the answer when all hell breaks loose in our life?

## REMEMBERING THEIR STORY

The answer is to remember  
who we are and whose we are.  
And that starts with a community of faith that has a story to tell.

Jesus was a part of a community  
that had a story to tell.

That story reminded them of who they were and whose they were.

We have an example in our Old Testament lesson for today.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 contains one of the oldest statements of faith in the Bible.

When people asked the Israelites who they were they said,

“My father was a wandering Aramean.  
He went down to Egypt,  
and lived there as an immigrant.  
Eventually our ancestors became a great nation.

But, the Egyptians felt threatened  
because there were so many of us.  
So they enslaved us.

We cried out to the Lord,  
and God led us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Finally, the Lord brought us to the Promised Land,  
a land flowing with milk and honey.  
And because God has been so good to us, we’re going to share what we  
have with others.”

Notice two things about this story.  
The Israelites not only remembered their faith story.  
They took it personally.

They said,

“The Egyptians mistreated *us*.  
God led *us* out of Egypt.  
God brought *us* into the Promised Land, this land flowing with milk and  
honey.”

Their present identity was shaped by the faith stories that they learned from  
an early age.

And second the faith stories they told shaped their behavior.

Since they had been strangers, immigrants in a foreign land and had been mistreated,  
they would treat immigrants in their own land differently.

They would share the bounty of the Promised Land with everyone.

They would treat the stranger with kindness.

Their faith story changed  
the way they treated others.

## REMEMBERING OUR STORY

That's why we also tell faith stories.  
They remind us of who we are and whose we are.

We read the Bible  
and tell those stories to our children.  
And like the Israelites, we summarize what we believe and repeat it often.

That's why we say the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed each week.  
It's not just a matter of getting it into our heads.  
It's a matter of getting it into our hearts.

Every time I say,  
"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors..."  
I have to change.  
Because every week I have been tempted not to forgive.

Every time I think that faith is about winning and things going right in my  
life,  
I remember what happened to Jesus.

He was crucified dead and buried.  
He descended into hell.  
And the third day he rose again."

His story was a struggle,  
and my story will be a struggle as well.

But, we trust our lives to the One  
who is the source of all life, the maker of heaven and earth.

Resurrection is not just about Jesus.  
It is about a promise given to all of us.

His story of sacrifice and forgiveness is our story.  
The one who comes to judge the living and the dead is also the embodiment of mercy.

These stories define us.

## OTHER STORIES

If we do not remember these stories, we forget who we are and whose we are.

We are at the mercy of those who tell us other stories.

Instead of being merciful and forgiving toward others because God has been merciful and forgiving toward us, we tell stories that feed our hungers and desire for power.

We have to prepare for that time of testing today.

For all of us there will come a time, that opportune time of testing when everything breaks down.

To all of us there will come that no good, very bad, terrible, horrible day.

And in that wilderness we will be tempted to forget who we are and whose we are.

When we're tired, hungry, bewildered and afraid,  
when things haven't gone as we've hoped or planned,

we too will begin to question our identity.

Maybe the Spirit descending  
and the voice from heaven...  
maybe that was all an illusion.

If God loves me so much, why am I in this wilderness?

Maybe there's no such thing as manna from heaven.  
Maybe I should just take what I need by any means necessary?

## ON THE ROAD TO THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION

But, then we remember.  
God led us through the wilderness long ago.  
God will lead us through the wilderness today.

God gave us what we needed  
in the wilderness long ago.  
God will give us what we need today.

God delivered Jesus from the cross and the grave.  
I can trust God to save me in this life and in the life to come.

This is God's Word.  
This is the story we live by.

This is the first Sunday of Lent.  
From now on we are on the road to the cross and the resurrection.

At Universal Studios,  
Madi Gras doesn't end with Fat Tuesday.  
The party just keeps going.

We might prefer to just keep the party going too.  
But, that's not our story.

Glory without suffering, the world under our thumb,  
a party that never ends...  
....we might prefer that.

But, that's not our story.

That's the vision Satan paints in our lesson for today.  
That's how he tries to tempt Jesus.

No mocking and abandonment.  
No betrayal or abandonment.  
Just greatness.

But, Jesus doesn't buy it.  
He knows the stories of his faith too well.  
He has the words of Scripture in his head  
and his heart.  
And he believes in the voice from heaven and the power of the Spirit.

This is still the big temptation in our culture.

We often value winning over integrity.  
And when we find ourselves in the wilderness,  
that temptation is even harder to resist.

That's why we love to tell the story  
of Jesus and his love.  
It'll not only be our theme in glory  
(as the song puts it),  
it is also (and more importantly) our theme when all hell breaks loose.

It is the story that saves us.  
It is the one word that saves us.

To quote another hymn, this one by Martin Luther,

“And though this world with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear for God has willed  
His truth to triumph through us.”

That's our story, and we're sticking with it!

Amen.