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Lent 1, C

Have any of you wondered *why* Jesus would head off into the wilderness? What was his purpose?

For years I've thought that maybe he needed some alone time to steel his nerve as he began his public journey of faith – a faith journey that would lead to public execution at the hands of those whom he loved. That makes sense ... mostly. But if that were so, what were those first 30 years about? Wouldn't those first 30 years have equipped him with the fortitude to do what he ultimately determined he would do, knowing he was the Son of God?

Then I thought maybe Jesus, the One who is both fully God and fully human, wandered to the wilderness, knowing what he would encounter there, for the purpose of facing (what I imagine to be) his greatest fear: that his humanity would overshadow his divinity and he would end up selling his soul to the devil. And that has made sense ... mostly. But from experience I know that at the very moment that I make the decision to face my fears, I've already overcome them. The resulting face-off is an exercise of proving to myself what I already know to be true of myself.

That leads me to think that maybe there is another way to look at this temptation story. Perhaps this story is about Jesus making a self-sacrificial offering to God after the grace of receiving the Spirit at his baptism.

Let's back up from this morning's Gospel passage just a bit. If you remember, Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by his cousin John, and immediately afterward, the Holy Spirit descends upon him and the voice from heaven proclaims him the Beloved, of whom God the Father is well pleased. Jesus is graced in the biggest, most profound way imaginable. And what does he do next? He immediately follows the Spirit into the wilderness to fast and pray.

This interaction Luke describes with Jesus and the devil was the first, and (I would argue) the most formative task of his early ministry – the deliberate choice to offer his life and his power and his faith to God – completely and unreservedly, for as

long as necessary, come what may. It was the very best he had to give, and what Moses (the author of Deuteronomy) might call a first-fruit offering.

The first temptation was about assuaging his hunger. Hunger messes with your mind as well as your mood. (Come find me at around 11:00 in the morning on a day I don't take time to eat a snack and you'll see living proof of it.) Hunger can make you say and do things that under normal circumstances you wouldn't say or do. But his response is measured and calm and rational and *perfect*. "One does not live by bread alone."

He's talking about not just the physical kind of hunger, but the spiritual kind as well. And he's talking about life – not simply his earthly life – but eternal life. He's talking about active participation in the cosmic dance and the mystery of relationship with God. He's talking about his Alpha-Omega life that warps time and space, and the life that *we* live in and through him today and tomorrow and the day after that. He's talking about the ultimate nourishment that one needs to do the work they are born to do. Here Jesus acknowledges that he needs the care and nourishment of something ... Someone far bigger than grain and water, and surrenders his life to the provision of God as an offering... as a response to the grace he has received from God.

The second temptation is about power and authority and control. Part of being human is wanting these things, and doing whatever we can to create the illusion of them when we fail to get the real deal. And Jesus says, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Again he is measured and calm and rational and perfect in his response. This simple response proclaims the truth that only God is in control, God is the ultimate authority, God is the only One with power. By paraphrasing the first commandment, Jesus is demonstrating his willingness to submit to and abide by God's law and God's authority.

So far we've seen Jesus make an offering of (1) his life, and now (2) his power.

The last of the temptations has to do with trust – a hard thing for any of us to surrender. Most of us have participated in those team-building exercises where we close our eyes and let ourselves fall backward, hoping that the person behind us will catch us before we fall. Standing up there on that high pinnacle, Jesus understood that if he fell, it would be further than a few stories from the top of the temple – it would be a fall that could rip the fabric of creation. Again, his response is perfect: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." He makes clear that

empirical evidence is not necessary for his life of faith. And thus his faith rounds out the three offerings Jesus gives to back God.

“One does not live by bread alone.” “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” These three statements were the first words spoken by Jesus after his baptism. They lie at the core of his relationship with God the Father. They are the truths by which he lives and dies.

It is at the beginning of his public ministry that he heads to the wilderness to face the intersection of his divinity and his humanity – a cross that he embraced and that will ultimately bookend his life and ministry. His first act (in the words of Deuteronomy) was to go into the creation that the Lord God gave him as an inheritance to possess, he settled in it, and he took the first of all the fruits of God’s great harvest that God gave him, and he gathered them in the untamed places that God gave him as a dwelling for his name and gave them back to God. His life. His power. His faith. These were Jesus’s first fruit offerings. He offered these things so that he could be a living sacrifice – not just for us, but for God as well.

They were offered as gifts to God in the face of great temptation, before any miracle was performed, any sermon preached, any life saved. Although by saying these things, to my mind he performed three miracles: he overcame his human needs to meet the greater needs of his spiritual self, he preached three perfect sermons in 10 words or less (!!!), and (perhaps most significantly of all) he formulated a three part blueprint for his spiritual life.

“One does not live by bread alone.” “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In these three statements, Jesus gives us a blueprint of our faith journey. We would do well this Lenten season to consider each aspect of Jesus’s blueprint. What are the things we attempt to nourish ourselves with? Do they truly sustain us and bring us life? Who or what do we worship, and how does our lived experience reflect that devotion? And finally, in what ways do we make our faith conditional? How do we (either deliberately or unconsciously) put God to the test?

Once we’ve taken a good, hard look inside ourselves, then we can prayerfully consider what sacrificial first fruit offering we can give to God as gratitude for the blessings in our lives. For Jesus, it was his life, his power, and his faith. What do you have that you can offer to God?

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Beloved is Where We Begin

By Jan Richardson

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.