

Lent 1C (3/10/2019)
 Deuteronomy 26:1-11
 Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
 Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

The God of Jesus is not a heavenly butler. To dictate the will of God in specific terms is to manipulate God to our own ends. In the face of even the most severe trial, Jesus refuses to provoke God, but trusts entirely in a divine mystery that transcends any single instance, any single life – the promise that no wilderness, not even the wilderness of death, can finally claim us.

It's no coincidence that Lent is forty days long. On the first Sunday of our own season in the wilderness, we hear the famous story of Jesus' forty days of hunger and testing. And, Jesus' wilderness experience at the outset of his ministry recalls the forty years the people of Israel wandered through their own geographical and spiritual desert, learning to be free and to live abundantly in trust and love of God. Forty is a symbolic number in the Bible, always signifying a critical time in between, "the necessary span before [a] gracious conclusion."¹

Forty is the time it takes to wait, to pay attention, to struggle.

To my knowledge, author Rachel Held Evans doesn't associate her own season of spiritual struggle with the number forty, but her story certainly sounds like a stint in the wilderness:

There was no great personal tragedy to shake my foundations, no injustice or betrayal to justify my falling away—just a few pesky questions that unraveled my faith like twine and left me standing here unable to sing a song I know by heart, chilled by a shadow no one else can see.

As with the death of someone dearly loved, I felt the absence of my faith most profoundly in those everyday moments when it used to be present—in

¹ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

church, in prayer, in the expansive blue of an autumn sky. I became a stranger to the busy, avuncular God who arranged parking spaces for my friends and took prayer requests for weather and election outcomes while leaving thirty thousand children to die each day from preventable disease. Instead I lay awake in my dorm room at night, begging an amorphous ghost of a deity to save me from my doubt and help me in my unbelief.²

Maybe you've wrestled with similar thoughts in your own life of faith.

Maybe you find yourself in a similar wilderness right now. **Faith comes easily in good times, but times of trial – whether they're personal, relational, or political – have a way of calling into question the convictions we might otherwise take for granted.**

This is the reason for the suspense in our Gospel from Luke. God has already confirmed Jesus' identity at the river Jordan: "You are my Beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."³ So, the question at the heart of today's Gospel is not whether or not Jesus is the Son of God, but what that identity means, that is, how this Son of God will respond to hardship and temptation.

The devil, of course, is treachery personified. In the words of one interpreter, "evil works on the basis of distortions and lies."⁴ The devil is not interested in what's best for Jesus, even if his propositions purport to benefit him: *You're hungry; turn these stones to bread! You've got good ideas; take hold of all this power! You're faithful; prove to these people at the temple that God is on your side!* No, **the devil is only interested in his own interests. And Jesus, for his part, is not interested in exercising his authority apart from God's**

² *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, 48, 51.

³ Luke 3:22.

⁴ Kimberly M. Van Driel, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 47.

wisdom: *One does not live by bread alone. Serve only the Lord your God. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

This time through the story, the third of the three temptations caught my attention. The appeal of plentiful food, the allure of earthly power – these are straightforward enough. But the devil’s third suggestion is a subtler, if even more dangerous test: “Throw yourself down from [the pinnacle of the temple], 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.’” *It is God’s will to rescue you*, he insists, *it’s right there in the Bible you seem to take so seriously!* These verses are the source material for the old warning that even the devil can quote scripture. Of course, the issue here is not the words of scripture themselves, but their interpretation.⁵ And, the devil’s interpretation is manipulative, even violent.

You don’t need to have evil intentions, however, to follow the devil’s example. In our attempts to make sense of a world that often doesn’t make sense, people of faith sometimes approach the challenges and promises of scripture too simplistically: “Ask, and it shall be given to you.”⁶ Faith certainly has the power to sustain us in difficult times, but an understanding of God’s activity that is too narrow, too prescribed will certainly disappoint us. That’s the wisdom of

⁵ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

⁶ Luke 11:9.

scripture itself, the wisdom to which Jesus refers: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”⁷

The God of Jesus is not a heavenly butler, forever at the beck and call of the faithful. And, we are not in a position to manage or even to interpret God’s activity in any given circumstance, but only to trust the broader promise of God’s mercy in spite of our uncertainty.

Truthfully, I’m suspicious of anyone who claims to know the precise will of God.⁸ That’s closer to superstition than it is to faith. To dictate the will of God in specific terms is to manipulate God to our own ends, an urge Jesus refuses to indulge. No, Jesus will not force God’s hand in this moment of testing, nor will he provoke God at the time of his greatest trial: “He saved others,” the authorities sneer at Jesus on the cross, “let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God....”⁹ **Jesus will be vindicated neither on the pinnacle of the temple nor on the cross, but instead on Easter morning. And in the end, “divine rescue [will] come *through* suffering and death and not only *before* (and *from*) them.”¹⁰**

Dear church, the mystery Jesus affirms in the wilderness – the same mystery we cling to in our own times of trial – is a mystery that transcends any single instance, any single life. It’s the promise that no wilderness, not even the wilderness of death, can finally claim us. Only God can do that.

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:16.

⁸ Tim Brown, <https://reluctantxtian.com/2012/05/17/5-phrases-i-think-christians-shouldnt-say/>.

⁹ Luke 23:35.

¹⁰ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 195.