

*Readings:* Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

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

It's six weeks since we were with Jesus at the Jordan, as he was baptised by John and heard the voice from heaven, “You are my son, my beloved - with you I am well pleased.”<sup>i</sup> There at his baptism Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and received divine confirmation of his identity. But now, in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, he is in the wilderness, and for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

The devil focuses on a question of identity. “Who are you?” If you are the son of God – or even 'since you are the son of God'. Jesus has been told by the voice from heaven that he is the Son, the beloved. He is tempted, tested at that point of identity – what does that mean? If you are the Son of God, what difference will it make? How will you live your life? What will you achieve? and by what means? - if you are the Son of God.

Immediately prior to what we read today is the genealogy which Luke places between the baptism and the temptation of Jesus. That genealogy ends 'son of Adam, son of God'<sup>iii</sup>. Jesus is not the first to be called the son of God and not the first to be tempted.

Adam, the human being created in the image of God, was tempted in the garden over this question of identity – why restrict yourself to faithful relationship with God, obedient to what God wants, when you could become like God<sup>iii</sup>? Adam (and Eve) failed to live as the son of God – they failed to live in faithful dependence on God,

Israel was also called 'the son of God' - it was for that reason that Moses asked Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. Because Israel was God's son, God heard the voice of the people, God saw their affliction and God acted to bring them out of slavery in Egypt, with a mighty hand and outstretched arm<sup>iv</sup>.

Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness<sup>v</sup>, just as Jesus was forty days in the desert.

And throughout that wilderness time, Israel was led by God<sup>vi</sup>.

Israel experienced great hunger and longing for bread, Israel was commanded to worship the one and only God alone, but Israel put the Lord to the test at Massah<sup>vii</sup>. Israel did not live as a faithful obedient son – rather, Israel 'rebelled and grieved God's holy spirit'<sup>viii</sup> (in the words of Isaiah). Israel, the son of God, failed to live in faithful obedience within that relationship.

So here another called 'Son' stands in the wilderness – will he be able to remain faithful and act as God's Son, that is, to act in unreserved obedience to God's will?

In Scripture, the wilderness, the desert is a recurring motif. The desert is not simply a physical location – it provides a picture, an metaphor for spiritual realities. The desert is a landscape<sup>ix</sup> that is testing in itself. The desert is hostile to life, devoid of sustenance, full of terrifying wild beasts. It is forbidding, untamed, uninhabitable. The desert is a place that strips human beings of their illusions of independence, and all that gives comfort, security and a sense of control. In the desert, human beings come face to face with human limitations, human frailty, human dependence, human creatureliness.

Yet the desert is also the place where people discover God present with them, God who created them, and God's unexpected all-sufficient grace.

The people of Israel were sustained in their wilderness wanderings by God's provision for them, and there were formed into the people God had chosen through their experiences there.

Hagar was driven into the desert by Abraham and Sarah, but there God saw her and provided for her.<sup>x</sup>

Elijah received God's provision as he sat in deep depression in the wilderness, wanting only to die.<sup>xi</sup>

Exile in Babylon was a desert time for the Jewish people, stripped of all that they had previously relied on. Because it is in the desert, stripped of all resources and comfort and security, stripped of all that human beings can achieve for themselves, that they learn they can rely on God's provision, on God's grace.

Wilderness testing poses the question – what do you rely on? what is essential for your life, for your identity? who are you?

Adam and Israel had been tested and had failed to live as the faithful son of God. Now Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness and tempted by the devil.

“If you are the Son of God” - why remain famished when you have the power to turn a stone into a loaf of bread? No one can do all that they could do, be all that they could be, when they are starving. Just one stone, just one loaf of bread – you can do this yourself.

But Jesus refuses to succumb to the temptation to live independently of God, to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. He knows that material provision is not enough for life – real human living requires more than physical nourishment.

“If you are the Son of God” - glory and authority are on offer. “How much power do you want – because it's all mine,” says the devil. Just worship me, just do things my way. The glory of Rome, the authority of the Empire, the exercise of power as control, domination and manipulation – this is the way the world worked (and still works) and it is devilish.

But Jesus refuses to give his allegiance to any but God – and in doing so he rejects the glory and authority that is part of the kingdoms of the world. He rejects the way of power as control. He commits himself to serve only God, and so to exercise only the power of life, creative, cooperative, regenerative. Ultimately this is the power of the cross, of utter vulnerability, of love loving to the uttermost.<sup>xiii</sup> Ultimately that is where Jesus' glory will be found – on Calvary.

“If you are the Son of God” - prove it in some spectacular fashion. Doesn't God promise security, protection, no harm will come to you? Let's see how much God loves you, let's demonstrate how pleased God is with you.

But Jesus will not test God in such a way. Neither will he limit God's presence and faithfulness to the preservation of his physical life. In the end, he will come to Jerusalem, and there he will face the final temptation “If you are willing, Father, remove this cup from me”.<sup>xiii</sup> Yet, even there, he trusted his life into God's hands, and continued to be the faithful and obedient son - “Not my will but yours be done'.

So, as we begin to journey with Jesus through this Lenten season, what temptations do we face? How is our identity as God's sons and daughters challenged?

The reading from Deuteronomy reminds us of all God has given us, and of God's call to us to live as grateful recipients of grace, recognising our dependence on God. I believe that one of the big temptations in our time and society is to live self-sufficient, self-reliant, self-entitled lives, as 'self-made people' rather than as creatures dependent on the one who created us in love.

Deuteronomy recognises that people who no longer live in the wilderness, constantly reminded of their limits, people who are living more settled, more sheltered, more secure lives, those people (like us) can quickly forget that their life depends on God. So the command was to bring the first fruits of the harvest each year as an offering which acknowledges that it is God's provision that has made this prosperity, this security possible. As they brought the offering, they were to remember, retell, even relive the history of God's saving grace – how they went from nothingness, aliens, few in number, to prosperity, mighty and populous, and then suffered the afflictions of slavery and oppression, until God heard them and saw them and acted to save them, brought them out of slavery and brought them into the land of plenty. God was the source of all they had – God was the one they were to worship.

During Lent, how might we practice a similar attitude of grateful dependence, recognising God's hand in all that we have received?

Grace at meals is one way that many of us do.

Bringing our offering here Sunday by Sunday in response to God's word. Perhaps the Lenten Carbon Fast. Even sorting through what we possess and bringing the things we don't need along for the fair in April or giving them to Presbyterian Support. This can be an act of grateful thanksgiving and a way of sharing God's bounty with others.

What we have read today reminds us that our lives, like Jesus', are not fully alive if we see no further than our physical needs or our material existence. We need to recognise and practise our dependence on God. We also need to consider the way we seek or use or respond to glory and authority – in our relationships with one another do we act in ways that build one another up, that share power by empowering others, that encourage cooperation and new possibilities, rather than keeping control of what we have control over, dominating and manipulating other people?

And we need to look again at what we expect of God – do we only want to recognise God working in spectacular ways, or when all is going well and we are safe and secure, or can we recognise that God is still with us in hard times, in suffering, in restricted circumstances and diminishing capability?

Jesus faced these temptations, and kept on facing them, full of the Holy Spirit.

When we face temptation, when we find ourselves in the wilderness stripped of those things which have given us comfort and security, when we are in danger of forgetting that we are creatures dependent on the loving creator, may we also rely on the same Holy Spirit and be strengthened to live lives of faithful obedience, because we also are children of God, and much loved.

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i Luke 3:22

ii Luke 3:38

iii Gen.3:1,5

iv Deut.26:7,8

v Exodus 16:35; Num.14:34; Deut.8:2,4

vi Exodus 8:2

vii Deuteronomy 6-8

viii Isaiah 63:10

ix James L. Resseguie, *Spiritual Landscapes : images of the spiritual life in the Gospel of Luke*

x Genesis 16

xi 1 Kings 19

xii Sally Purves, *The Power of the Cross: foundations for a Christian feminist ethic of community*

xiii Luke 22:42