



'Managing Temptation'

First Sunday in Lent
5:30 pm, Saturday, February 13, 2016
8:15 & 11:00 am, Sunday, February 14, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#); [Romans 10:8b-13](#); [Luke 4:1-13](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Christmas photo at my mother's house is staged the same every year. My mother and I (and my father, when he was living) sit on the couch. My three children sit on the floor at our feet. My husband Randy takes the picture. It's interesting to look through those photos over the years. You'd expect to see changes as the children grew. What's fascinating is to see how I am slowly but clearly beginning to look like my mother. Years ago, my looks favored my father. But no more. I look more and more like Joan Rouse.

So much so that my cat, Leah, absolutely loves my mom. Because Leah absolutely loves me. And when my mother visits and when we are in the same room, Leah looks back and forth at both of us as if she is quizzically considering, "Hmmm. There are two of her. The nice lady who feeds me each morning—I've got two of her!"

Yet long before that physical resemblance set in, I began to sound like my mother. It's not that we have the same quality of voice. It's not that I tried somehow to imitate her. It's that the words that came out of my mouth always sounded vaguely familiar, as if I heard them before. And I had. Sometimes this happened when I was dealing with questions my children asked over the years. Questions about why we as a family do certain things. Why don't we buy whatever? So-and-so has one. Why can't I go to such-and-such? Everyone else is. Why do we do this? We don't know anyone else who does.

I'm quite sure my response came out sounding just like my Mom: "Because that's not who we are." "That's not the way we spend our time or money." "That's just not what is important to us." "That's not what we're about." Then I tried to describe what we were about. I can't be certain my words were understood. They were words which sometimes disappointed. But I said them as a parent who considered such teachable moments as part of my ministry to my kids. Randy and I always hoped our words provided a foundation for our children as they grew, rooting them in an identity as a member of the Rouse and Easton families, who are shaped by some very specific values and priorities. And I'd say these values and priorities were often based on our faith: This is who we are as Christians. This is what we're about because we follow Jesus.

Don't you suppose that is true for any of us? That we need to be rooted in an identity? If you and I don't know who we are, what we're about, we risk losing ourselves in

a world which is more than happy to tell us who to be and what to do; what has value and how to seek it. Without being rooted in an identity, we are empty vessels, just waiting to be filled. Look, I remember realizing that if I didn't feed my kids a nutritious supper when they were young, limited as their dietary range might be, they would end up choosing to pig out on junk food all evening. And like that junk food, what the world can fill us with may not be nourishing, or sustain us for the long haul.

The operative question in our lessons today seems to be that question of identity—"Who are you?" The answer to this question makes all the difference. Consider Jesus out in the wilderness. What is the devil doing as he tempts Jesus, but asking in a variety of ways: "Who are you?" Who are you? Why not go ahead and feed yourself? Whip up the voodoo that you do so well and make a loaf of bread already. Of all people, you shouldn't have to go hungry. That is, if you really are the Son of God...

Who are you? Think about the possibilities—fame, wealth, power, the sky's the limit! And I can give it to you right here, right now, if you just listen to me. Why shouldn't you have what you deserve? That is, if you really are the Son of God...

Who are you? Take a dive from the temple heights—what a rush! Experience freefall without worry and without a bungee cord. A little risk is what free will is all about, right? Those angels will grab you at the last minute. You know full well your Father in heaven isn't going to let anything happen to you. That is, if you really are the Son of God...

Yes, Jesus really is the Son of God, but you can see what the devil is up to here. The devil takes Jesus' identity, as if it is an empty vessel, and tries to fill it up with a lot of junk for his own purposes. He tempts the Son of God to be someone other than what his heavenly Father wants him to be. The devil tempts Jesus to use his powers for selfish reasons, to take the easy road to gain a kingdom, and to manipulate God.

Except that Jesus is not an empty vessel. Jesus' identity as the Son of God is already filled and shaped. See how our gospel lesson opens up? "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." Just before this 40-day wilderness trek, Jesus was at the Jordan River being baptized. That's where the Holy Spirit came upon him and voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This Jesus already has an identity. Jesus, the Son of God, is loved by his Father. Who he is and what he does is pleasing to his Father. And the knowledge of this truth rings in Jesus' ears as he enters the wilderness. These words help him in the wilderness to "manage temptation." And it's not only these words that help him. As the devil places one temptation in front of him after another, Jesus responds with other words that come from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy—words Jesus learned in the synagogue as a faithful Jew. Jesus' very identity is rooted in those words. Words like this: Bread doesn't sustain—only the eternal, truthful word of God does. God alone is to be worshiped and no other, and power is not a thing to be grasped. Testing God has nothing to do with actually trusting God.

With God's word, and with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus stands his ground: This is who I am. This is what I'm about.

We heard today in our first reading how the people of Israel had an identity. We heard the creed they recited which told of their rootedness as God's people, as people in a covenantal relationship with 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. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord...The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction... The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The people of Israel found that these words give shape to their identity, and sustained them when they faced temptations and challenges. These words were intended to be ways they could remind one another and themselves: This is who we are. This is what we're about.

So it begs the question...what about OUR identity? Well, you and I have been given an identity, and it, too, is rooted in the very word of God, and his determination to make us his people. In Holy Baptism, we are rooted into Jesus Christ, adopted into God's family. This identity continues to be shaped by the power and presence of the Spirit. When we say the creed in just a few minutes, we are reminding one another and ourselves who God is, and thus, who we are and what we're about. Sons and daughters of God, beloved every one.

Now, we would be foolish to think that baptism, creedal statements and worship attendance somehow inoculate us from temptation. Quite the contrary. As the late theologian Peter Gomes said, "Temptations...are the consequences of a life set apart for goodness and God's will." In other words, the more we identify ourselves as God's children, and as disciples of Jesus, the more we strive to love our neighbor unconditionally and obey God, well, the more we may experience the struggle of temptation. Recall that Jesus was tempted after his baptism, after he was filled with the Spirit's power—not before.

But while baptism, creedal statements and worship attendance can't inoculate us from temptation, they do provide a means for managing it. That's what Pastor David Lose suggests. He writes, "In the face of so many assaults on our identity, we come to church to have that identity renewed and restored that we might live in the confidence of God's abundant life and share with those around us God's unending love." (David Lose, "In the Meantime")

Our story from Luke acknowledges we live in a world where temptation exists, where we are constantly pulled away from God and his intentions for us. But that story tells us something else: The devil cannot fill a vessel already shaped and filled with this truth: Jesus is Lord—these words are near us, on our lips and in our hearts. Jesus is Lord—such goodness and righteousness and truth as this strips the tempter of his power. Jesus is Lord—and his Spirit is ever at work transforming us into his image. So that we, too, might look a bit more like him, and sound a bit more like him. So that we, too, might stand our ground and boldly respond: This is who we are. This is what we're about. **AMEN.**

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