Questions and Encounters: If and How
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Matthew 4:1-11; John 3:1-9

Our first passage for today is the lectionary reading from the Gospels assigned for the First Sunday in Lent. Every year, on this Sunday, we are given one Gospel’s version of the temptation narrative. Only John’s Gospel is left out, because John doesn’t have a temptation story. Listen now for how the devil (literally—an adversary—one who is thrown against) tests Jesus with the use of “if, then” statements, which in this case are really implicit questions. In other words, “If you are who you say you are or think you are, then why don’t you do this?” And notice how Jesus responds.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Alongside the temptation story, I’d like to read a bit of next week’s Gospel lesson, which we will not hear because the youth are preaching on Micah 6 next week. And by the way, don’t miss Youth Sunday. It is one of the best Sundays of the year and not just because I’m not in the pulpit! Notice the interaction between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born
from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’

Rainer Maria Rilke, in a now famous passage from his Letters to a Young Poet published in 1903, wrote to a protégé who was wrestling with questions and in Rilke’s view trying to generate answers too quickly.

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

There is great wisdom in Rilke’s words, of course, and it is a wisdom that becomes clearer as I find myself living into some answers as I grow older. But loving the questions, at whatever age we happen to be, and living them, is easier said than done. I think there is part of each of us that would like to resolve the questions, arrive at the iron-clad answers, and have all of that settled and done. You know, maybe by the time we finish, I don’t know, our confirmation statement of faith in our 8th grade year. And sadly, too often, seriously wrestling with life’s questions, especially the big questions of faith, stops then or not much later than then. For some, it hardens into a religious fundamentalism. For others, it stiffens into an atheism that belittles faith perspectives. As if embracing the insights of science and the deep wisdom of spiritual faith were an either/or rather than, possibly, a both/and proposition.

In preparing a plan for preaching through Lent and Easter, I noticed that the Gospel texts assigned for these Sundays were marked by two things—one, people encountering Jesus, and two, people asking questions of Jesus. I want to spend some time with those questions and encounters this Lent.

People who come to Jesus with questions... Isn’t that what we are, after all?

Today’s encounter with Jesus, the one I want to spend most of my time on, comes in the wilderness of Judea, and the one who encounters Jesus is named, in our text, the devil.

Now the word Devil typically evokes for us, in the popular imagination, a man in a red suit with a pitchfork and horns on his head, you know- the Halloween costume devil. And we associate the Devil with a Lord of the Underworld, laughing as souls are consigned to Hell.

But the word Devil, which is not capitalized in Greek by the way, is simply the word diabolos, from which we get the word diabolical, with its negative connotations. It’s from the root word bolos/ballo, which means to cast or throw, paired with the preposition dia, which means against or through. Bolos is the same root word, by the way, from which we get the word parable—
to throw alongside, and Symbol—to throw with. Parable, symbol, devil—all from the same root word.

In Matthew’s temptation narrative, there is a *diabolos*, who throws something against or through Jesus. Some voice who functions as an Adversary, coming against him. In the history of Christian interpretation of this text, that Adversary has been linked to Satan (the one in the Book of Job who tells God, “Of course he praises you—everything is going well for him. I tell you what, God. Let me throw some challenges his way and see how he does with being righteous then.”).

Now we don’t really know how the encounter between Jesus and the *diabolos* played out. We just have a story about it. Perhaps the *diabolos* was a physical presence outside of him. Horns or not. Perhaps it was to symbolize a conversation happening within Jesus, inside himself.

However you understand what’s going on with the *diabolos* here. He, she, it doesn’t seem to have Jesus’ best interest at heart. The “if” he introduces—“if you are the son of God, then...”—don’t seem to be well-intentioned. They seem malicious, intended to knock Jesus off his game, off his mission. And they’ve certainly been portrayed in the worst possible light over the years.

But as we examine the encounter between Jesus and the *diabolos*, the one who comes against, I want to invite you to take a risk with me. I want you to take the risk of identifying with the one who asks those questions, so we might learn from how Jesus answers them.

*If/then* statements are in their own way questions, because they are asking for proof, and raising uncertainty. *If you are the son of God, then why don’t you prove it to me and to yourself? Turn these stones into bread, why don’t you? After all, you are mighty hungry.*

I don’t know whether you happened to catch the Academy Awards last Sunday evening and saw Matthew McConaughey’s acceptance speech for his best actor Oscar, but if you saw it, you know that he referenced God and gratitude.

The Huffington Post religion section posted an article about him thanking God and how the reactions to that on Twitter were mixed. I’m always a little ambivalent myself about such public declarations. On the one hand, I think it is good to acknowledge God and we need not be embarrassed about that. But on the other, there is enough of the “frozen chosen” Presbyterian in me that I think there are times and places for that, especially when it can come across in a self-aggrandizing way. So I myself was a little torn.

As I glanced over the article I broke the number one internet rule. Do you know what the number one rule of the internet is? Don’t read the comments. *Never look at the comments.*

As I glanced down the comments, which were numerous, so many of them were from voices mocking the idea of God’s very existence—saying things like, “I’m sorry he feels like he has to give credit to an imaginary friend for his hard work. I get angry at people who thank God for their petty
awards, what kind of monster would be concerned with him getting an award while millions of children starve.” Behind that mocking question is one that we might have ourselves. If God exists, if God is more than some kind of imaginary friend, then why is there hunger and pain in the world?

It’s a question people ask, and not just people who want to mock religion because they’ve resolved that question in their minds by saying there is no God.

So, note Jesus’ response. He doesn’t make the bread out of stones, even though he is famished and there doesn’t appear to be any food around in the wilderness. He himself is starving. God, by the way, hasn’t yet ever turned stones into bread to address the issue of hunger in the world.

What Jesus does instead of miraculously turning stones into bread to feed his own physical hunger, is to quote Torah. He calls to mind the story of Israel being fed by manna in the wilderness as he quotes Deuteronomy, saying, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God’s mouth.”

Some of those words come from the pen of Isaiah by the way, in words that are often read at Ash Wednesday, “Is this not the fast that I choose? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and to not turn yourself from your own kin?”

In the ancient Israel in which Deuteronomy was first recorded, and in Isaiah’s time, in Jesus’ day, and today—and all throughout history—to say that God exists and loves the world has never meant that God magically fixes the problem of hunger and pain. No, God relies—and has always relied—on human beings like you and me to do that by sharing our bread with the hungry, our resources with the poor. And yes, the annual Immanuel Auction is great fun, but the beauty of our Auction is that it raises enormous amounts of money to help people in need and that is God’s work.

If the hungry don’t get fed in a world of plenty, that’s not God’s fault, and that’s not an indication that God doesn’t exist. That is our shortcoming. And frankly those who raise questions about invoking God’s name to celebrate receiving fame and fortune are right to wonder why people can do that so glibly when so much pain gets ignored and goes unaddressed by people who claim God has blessed them (which, by the way, is why McConaughey might at least have said a word or two about the plight and work of the character he portrayed and those whom Ron Woodroof was trying to help, because there are people still today who need medicine, and there are people still today who are dying of AIDS.)

The next question the voice who comes against Jesus to test and taunt him asks is, “If you are the son of God, then why don’t you throw yourself off the top of the temple and see if God sends angels to catch you? You know, it talks about that in scripture. Let’s see some magic trick to prove your identity to me and to yourself, Jesus. After all, your own scriptures say that God sends angels to protect people.”
But the Jesus we meet in the Gospels doesn’t need to prove himself. He’s secure in his identity. He doesn’t get defensive. He simply says, quoting Deuteronomy again, “Don’t put the Lord your God to the test.”

I don’t need to be rescued from high risk behavior to prove to you or to myself or to anyone else that I’m a child of God, Jesus is saying, or that God exists. I know that actions have consequences and that if I do x, a very unpleasant y might result. If I drink and drive, I might lose my license or worse. If I have an unaddressed addiction, I might lose my relationships, my career, or even my life. If I handle a snake, for God’s sake, there’s a better than average chance that I’ll eventually get bitten. That doesn’t mean I’m not a beloved child of God. It just means that belief in a higher power doesn’t mean that the laws of cause and effect go out the window.

The final testing Jesus goes through from the diabolos centers on a promise that the tester will give him everything, if he will just fall down and worship the diabolos.

And here’s where oddly, I think it might do us the most good to get into the devil’s shoes for a moment. Because what he does is what a lot of us are tempted to do, I think.

We approach faith as if it were all about God doing what we want, rather than us doing what God wants. As if faith were about using God rather than being used by God for the work of love and justice and peace, to name a few things. We approach faith as if it is about us casting God in our image, rather than us living out what it means to be created in the image of a God of love.

Anne Lamott says that you know you’ve created God in your own image, when God hates the very same people that you hate.

The bargain we try to make with God is the very same one that the diabolos tries to make with Jesus. “If you’ll just do what I want, then I’ll give you everything (which is a promise that none of us can keep, by the way, although we won’t mention that at stewardship time.). If you give me everything I want, I’ll worship you; I’ll put you first. But if you don’t engage in fulfilling my desires, then be gone with you. You are a silly myth. An imaginary friend.”

Jesus’ response to the diabolos is instructive here. He quotes Deuteronomy again and he says, “Worship the Lord Your God and serve only him.”

One of the things I’ve learned from living the questions over 47 plus years, and some of you have lived the questions longer, is this:

If my faith is contingent upon the God who is made known in Jesus magically feeding every hungry person, or nothing bad ever happening to me or people I love, giving me everything that I ask for, then I might as well scrap it. Because that is not what faith in the God Jesus worshiped and came to embody is about.
So maybe the better question is the question that Nicodemus asks when Jesus tells him, “You have to be born from above. The Spirit blows where it will and you hear the sound of it but don’t know where it is going. But you have to be led by the Spirit.”

The question Nicodemus asks is not based in an “if, then” statement. It is simply, “How can this be?” That’s a question best asked in wonder. Amen.

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i Rilke, Ranier Maria Letters to a Young Poet. Worpswerde, near Bremen. July 16th, 1903.
ii http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/03/matthew-mcconaughey-god-oscar_n_4891213.html