

“Signs and Miracles: Becoming Who We Are”

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Luke 4:1-13, John 6:1-15

Today we continue our series on miracles by looking at two passages of scripture. One, Luke's version of the temptation in the wilderness, gives us Jesus refusing to perform a miracle for himself. The second, John's version of the feeding of the 5000, shows us Jesus performing a miracle for others, but withdrawing when the crowd tries to grab him and make him king.

As you listen to this first passage, you'll notice that the devil is mentioned. I don't plan to deal with the devil today. Ha-ha. There have been and will be other sermons here that cover the concept of the devil and the problem of evil more in depth. For today, I invite you to see the character of the devil as a device, a personification of that impulse in and around us that draws us away from trusting in to testing God, that deceives us into thinking we can go it on our own, and that is ultimately self- and other- destructive. Listen for how Jesus faces down that impulse.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 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."' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Our second passage is from John's Gospel. While John does not have a story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, I think this story might be the nearest thing to it, because after Jesus feeds the crowds, they come and try to make him king (a bit like the devil offering him authority over all the kingdoms of the world)--and rather than let his ego surrender to their desire, he goes off to a place by himself, presumably to pray and remember who he is and what he's to be about.

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the

mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

In *The Sellout*, the Man Booker prize winning novel by Paul Beatty, the main character, a young African-American man, says, "You have to ask yourself two questions. Who am I? And how can I become myself?"¹

The book, which I just heard about a few weeks ago and now desperately want to read, details the absurdist journey he takes to answering those questions. In turn, it might cause us to ask how any of us, and our country as a whole, might answer them, in light of racial injustice and otherwise. *Who are we? And how can we become who we are made to be? How can we become our best selves?*

I think those are pretty good questions to carry with us as we move into the season of Lent. Because whatever else Lent is about, the Presbyterian author and preacher Frederick Buechner is right that it is a time when Christian people are supposed to ask what it means to be ourselves, and how we might become more fully who we were created and called and redeemed to be.

In that endeavor, we have a model in Jesus, who as Buechner puts it, spent 40 days in the wilderness grappling with those questions himself, asking himself what it meant to be Jesus. He's just been baptized. He's just heard God's voice telling him and those around him, that he is God's beloved child and that God is pleased with him. He's just had the Spirit come down on him like a dove, and now, according to our passage from Luke, he's been led into the wilderness by that same Holy Spirit. The Gospel of Mark puts it another way. The Gospel of Mark says that the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness.

Rather than framing how Jesus grappled with the question of *who he is and how he might become himself* as an internal dialogue, Luke sets up the devil as an interlocutor, trying to get Jesus to succumb to a different way of defining himself and what it means to be God's beloved child. Though the text says Jesus was tempted for forty days, Luke boils those temptations down into the form of three "If-then" statements.

First Jesus, who hasn't eaten in 40 days, hears a voice saying, "You're hungry. **If** you are God's beloved child, **if** you are God's beloved child, **then** prove it. Perform a miracle. Turn this stone into a loaf of bread **for yourself.**"

Next Jesus, who must have known that his way of vulnerable love would come at great cost, hears that same voice saying, "If you will worship ME—**if** you will make ego and fear and desire for

control more important than your identity as God's child and trusting in God, *then I will give you authority over all the kingdoms of this world.*"

Finally Jesus, who by this point might have liked to have had a tiny miracle worked on his behalf, just a little proof that God loved him, hears that same voice say, "If you are God's beloved child, then prove it. Throw yourself down from the top of the temple. After all, scripture says, 'God will command God's angels to protect you and they will bear you up so that you do not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus withstands all of these temptations, of course because he's Jesus and he does so because he has, or develops, a clear sense of who he is and what it means to be what he was meant to be. But we do him, and ourselves, a disservice if we downplay the difficulty of that challenge that he faced. Because knowing that one is a child of God doesn't mean that it's not tempting to want to turn stones into bread when one is famished, or to give into our hunger for revenge when we've been hurt, or to feast on our anger and our resentment when we've been wronged, or to excuse our giving in to any one of a hundred unhealthy appetites. I've heard more than once, and I've even said it myself, "If you knew what kind of life I've had, you'd drink, too." There's always an excuse. By not giving into working a miracle for himself to address what was surely in his case a justifiable hunger, and responding to the voice that tried to convince him to do so with a calm assurance and a statement from scripture that human beings don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth, Jesus shows us that it is possible to rely upon God to face down other unhealthy, ego-driven impulses. None of us will ever face the temptation to turn stones into bread. That's not a temptation that any of us faces. The temptations and addictions we face are more commonplace, and Jesus shows us that it is possible to face them down with God's help.

And knowing one is a child of God doesn't mean that it's not tempting to eschew the path of vulnerable love in the name of grabbing for power and control. The world in which we live can be a scary place. It is easy to believe if we could just run things and have them go according to our liking, God would be in God's heaven and all would be right with the world. And the illusion that we can control people, places, events, and things is a truly seductive one. So we are always susceptible to the temptation of selling out for the sake of obtaining power.

It plays itself out in the political realm all of the time. In the name of getting what they want, people of all political stripes, **all** political stripes, sell out their deeply held convictions, and excuse behaviors and hypocrisy they would never tolerate in the other party. Every time we do that, you and I, we sell a little bit of our souls and squander a little bit of our integrity and wind up worshipping our egos, and not a God who stands over and above the political realm, asking us to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

That's where real authority lies, and the trick when it comes to exercising power in any realm of our lives from the personal to the political is to remember that it is about something larger than ourselves. We are ultimately accountable to God, not party, not country, and certainly not our own fragile egos. We're accountable to God. In rejecting the devil's offer to seize power, and avoiding the crowds in John who want to make him king after he works a miracle, Jesus shows us that it is possible to keep proper perspective and to remember that God is in control, and not us.

Jesus responds to the voice which offers him power over everything, anything he wants, by saying, "Scripture says, worship the Lord your God and serve only him." To put it in terms of my mantra, what Jesus is really saying here is, "It's not about me, thanks be to God." How easy it is for any one of us to forget, in any realm of our lives, that it is not ultimately about us, but what God can do in

and through us, including working for justice, including practicing mercy, including walking humbly with God.

The third temptation Jesus faces as he grapples with what it means to be himself, a beloved child of God, is the desire, at the end of a long and stressful time in the wilderness, when he is famished, absolutely famished, to test God. To have God show him a sign that he is beloved. The voice Jesus hears knows that it is always best to wait until a person is hungry, angry, lonely, or tired to give them the opportunity to step over the line. That's why the acronym has come about: hungry, angry, lonely, tired, HALT. Halt. Stop. Think before you act. That's exactly what Jesus does. The voice says, "Jump off the top of the temple, the Bible says, God will take care of you. Let God prove it to you." But Jesus doesn't jump, because he reaches for scripture and says, "The Bible says, don't put the Lord your God to the test."

So let's turn for a minute to miracles, again. Now over the course of my life I have seen any number of remarkable things happen that I attribute to God's miraculous hand. The twelve-step rooms I frequent are filled with people who are nothing less than signs that God is in the business of saving people from themselves and their worst impulses. Every single one of those people is a miracle. But I've also seen far too many people die too early whether from addiction, or despair, or terminal disease. I've seen people receive good news that their longing to have a child is going to be fulfilled and I've seen people whose hopes in that regard were dashed. Many of them have prayed-and in many cases I knew about I prayed for them as well and as hard as I possibly could. I've prayed hard for people to get well, and they didn't.

To be a child of God doesn't mean we always get what we pray for. It doesn't mean we don't occasionally give into our worst temptations. It means that God will be with us in life and in death, even when we can't, or won't allow ourselves, to feel that.

There is a difference between trusting God and testing God. Trusting God is praying, and then trusting God with the results, and then doing what we can with our hands and hearts and feet and lives to work for health and healing and hope. Testing God is saying, "Okay, if you say you're God, if you say you're in control, God, then, prove it to me. Do what I want."

Along those lines I do love the joke that I heard once about the man who was praying to win the lottery. He prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed. Then he prayed some more. It went on like this for five, six, seven months. Finally God showed up to him in a dream. God said, "Joe, I understand that you've been praying to win the lottery. That's wonderful. I'm glad you are talking to me about that. But do me a favor, at least buy a ticket.

Joe was testing God. But even trusting in God doesn't mean we win the lottery. It just means we don't have to be alone.

Frederick Buechner closes his marvelous meditation on Lent in his book *Wishful Thinking* with the following questions that we might ask ourselves as we're trying to discern what it means to be Christians.

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?

Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

*If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?*²

Buechner says that:

*To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sack-cloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.*³

Who are we? And how can we become who we're meant to be, miracles or not?

1 Paul Beatty. *The Sellout*. (New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015).

2 & 3 Frederick Buechner. *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*. (San Francisco. Harper San Francisco. 2004).