



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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First Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2019

“Identity Crisis”

(Luke 4:1)

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“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil” (Lk. 4:1).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of Your church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

One of the pastors in our district, before he went to the seminary actually served for eight years in the CIA. I was with him a couple of weeks ago, and we talked about the skills he learned in his first career that transferred well into his second career. He focused on two things. First, in both vocations it's important to know how to keep secrets, to be discreet and confidential. In both vocations there are some things you just cannot talk about, with anyone.

Second, he said it's important in both careers to have a very clear sense of identity. That is, to know who you are, what your mission is (and what it isn't) and to know to whom you are ultimately accountable. It's important, he said, because in both careers your identity is probed, tested, and challenged. In both careers there are external forces trying to introduce cracks and weaknesses in your sense of identity.

Not just for CIA agents and pastors, I would suggest it's important for us all to have a clear sense of identity, to remember that, before anything else, we are baptized children of God, belonging to him. Everything else is secondary. Your identity as a child of God informs all your other vocations, how you will go about doing your work, how you will be a spouse or parent or grandparent or citizen. It's important to have that clear sense of identity as child of God because Satan will be probing and testing and challenging, trying to introduce cracks and fissures, and he will exploit any vulnerability.

In our text, Satan is tempting Jesus. Jesus has been in the wilderness fasting for forty days. In a classic understatement Luke says "he was hungry." Give the tempter his due: his timing is perfect. He doesn't make a move until Jesus is at his low point. Then he circles around Jesus, lunging in like a predator around his prey. But it's not a physical attack. Satan

would say it's just a conversation, that's all, sort of like the one he had with Eve.

Each of the temptations has been carefully thought out and custom-made just for Jesus. The first, of course, is for Jesus to meet his own basic needs, to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. What could be so bad about that, using your abilities to serve yourself? The second is political in nature. Satan offers to make Jesus king over all the kingdoms of the world. "Think of the good you can do with all that power, Jesus." The third is religious in nature. "Some are saying you are the Son of God. Prove it. Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and let his angels rescue you. Show people what a real leap of faith looks like."

Suffice it to say if Jesus gives in to any one of these, we've just lost our Savior. Of course, Satan doesn't mention that. No self-respecting devil will ever approach you with offers of long-term personal ruin. He will never say, "Please know this momentary pleasure might shatter your life and your family." All that is in the micro script, the legal jargon at the bottom of the page, the stuff no one ever reads.

In any event, there are two ways to think about temptation and being tempted. The first is to imagine temptation as enticement toward something bad and wrong. That's the way we usually think of it. What we often forget is that simultaneously, temptation encourages us *away* from something good and right.

So, for example, one can be tempted toward alcohol and drugs to numb the pain and feel good, while simultaneously drawing us away from finding hope, meaning and relief in God and his promises. One can be enticed toward pornography while simultaneously being drawn away from one's spouse and one's identity as a husband or wife. When the devil tempts us, he's also trying to introduce an identity crisis.

Think of a time in your life when you just sort of gave yourself over to something you knew was wrong, bad, not God pleasing. Maybe it was a relationship, or some kind

of addictive behavior. My guess is that's also the time when you didn't feel much like a child of God. You didn't want to come to worship. You didn't want approach God in confession. It felt like you were just going through the motions and your faith seemed like a thin veneer.

That's the devil at work doing what he does . . . tempting us yes, but even more so attacking our identity as a child of God. For the tempter quickly becomes the great accuser. "You're no Christian. You're a fake, a fraud. You're low grade, imitation vanilla cooked up in some lab, not the real deal. Just look at how you live your life! How can you call yourself a Christian? And look at all the doubts you have. Wow! What a shame! And what a sham too!"

When the devil tempts us, simultaneously he attacks our identity as a child of God. He did it with Jesus. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." "If you are . . ." He says it twice. In the previous chapter of Luke, when Jesus was baptized there came a voice from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son." Now the devil is attacking that identity, "You are not really who the Father says you are."

This is how he's always operated. Way back in Genesis 2, God said very clearly to Adam and Eve, "You are free to eat from *any* tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (v. 17). All these are available to you. All these will give you very good, very satisfying fruit. Just stay away from this one. Keep your hands off that fruit. That fruit will kill you. Perfectly clear; perfectly reasonable; not at all unfair or unduly difficult. But here comes the devil: "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" Right from the start, he's misquoting, confusing, and introducing doubt in God's Word. Then he goes after Eve's identity as a child of God. "You will not surely die" he says, "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Gen. 3:6). In other words, "You can be more than just a child of God, a creature. If you want, you can be like God,

like the Creator!”

The devil is always trying to stir up an identity crisis. Whenever we're being drawn toward something bad or wrong, we are simultaneously being pulled away from something good and right.

Well, how did Jesus contend with these temptations? With sheer, blind obedience to God's Word. He keeps saying, "It is written. It is written. It is written." He doesn't rely on will power, or his supernatural power, or his reason or intelligence. Instead, he takes hold of God's Word written thousands of years before his birth, and submits himself to it. That's his lifeline out there in the wilderness. He sent Satan on his way frustrated and befuddled by being obedient to God's Word.

When the Evil One is working you over, don't look inward for guidance or strength. Look to God's Word, like Jesus did. When the devil is nagging you with temptations, nag him with the Word, just like Jesus did.

It is written, "Resist the devil and he will flee." Jesus resisted and the devil fled, quote, "until an opportune time." He would be back. But in spite of all his ongoing efforts, the devil suffered ongoing failures because Jesus remained true to the Word of God and to his identity as the Son of God. He made no concessions to the devil. Instead, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

What does this mean for us? On those days when the devil has hit his mark and you have missed yours, know that you are still a child of God. Sin does not have the power to undo your identity as a child of God, only unbelief does. Sin does not have the ability to reverse the fact that you were baptized and adopted by God. Again, only unbelief can do that.

A couple of weeks ago in a school chapel service we sang a song the refrain of which was: "You're a good, good Father. It's who you are. And I'm loved by you. It's who I am." So true! Our identity is not wrapped up in what we do, in our behavior. It comes first from the love of our God

of Father. He's the one who created you, redeemed you through Christ, and has claimed you as his own child through Holy Baptism. That's who he is. And you are loved by him. That's who you are.

No sin, however grievous, can undo that. In 1 John 1, it is written, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (v. 9). Therefore, in Psalm 130, it is written, "Put your hope in the Lord (that is, not in yourself, your own obedience, your own sanctity or piety . . .) Put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption" (v. 7).

The devil tempts, and then accuses, while also trying to chip away at your identity as a child of God. God forgives you, and saves, while also loving you as his own child. In Romans 8 it is written, "You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness . . . that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (v. 15).

It is written. Thanks be to God that our identity is not wrapped up in what we do. It's wrapped up in the love of God for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

