

Matthew 4:1-11

Talking with Jesus: A *Question of Identity*

Lent 1

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama

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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted 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.

I was watching TV with my grandson one day when a commercial came on for Hatchimals—this toy that comes in an egg, and then somehow grows into a goofy-looking fuzzy animal. My grandson was watching it with great interest, then, abruptly, he turned his body away. "I can't play with those!" he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"They're for girls," he said.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“They’re pink and purple.”

My grandson!!!!

He didn’t get that from me, and I don’t think he got it from his parents, either. On the other hand, it occurs to me that none of us has ever given him any toys that are pink or purple, either.

Even in these supposedly-enlightened times, the expectations of what girls can do and what boys can do; what girls are interested in and what boys are interested in; what girls act like and what boys act like, are embedded in everything.

The same is true for race. US News reported a couple of years ago on a study at Yale, in which preschool teachers were shown videos of small children playing, and were asked to watch for problem behavior. “Using eye-tracking technology,” says the article, “the researchers found that the teachers - both white and black - spent much more time watching the black children, particularly the black boy. It was exactly what [the research] team expected to find based on preschool disciplinary rates.”¹

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-09-28/yale-study-finds-preschool-teachers-watch-black-boys-closer-for-bad-behavior>.

The kicker is, there was actually no problematic behavior in the video.

Everything about that study is chilling to me, including the phrase “preschool disciplinary rates.”

There are so many ways in which others define who we are.

- From the labels on our birth certificates that are given to us before we can even talk—name, sex, even (if your birth certificate is like mine) race—
- to what commercials pop up on our computer screen
- to what interests we’re expected to have
- to what classes we’re steered toward in school
- to what careers we’re expected to pursue
- to which household tasks we’re expected to perform.

Assumptions of what it means to be a man or a woman or an American or a Christian or you-name-it. All day, every day, we are bombarded with assumptions of who we are, whether those assumptions fit us or not.

“If you are the Son of God,” the tempter says to Jesus, “then turn these stones into bread.”

“If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from the temple, and God will save you.”

“If you are the Son of God, then fall in with me and you can rule the whole world.”

Because, of course, those are the sorts of things a Son of God would be expected to do.

Only, he won't. Jesus refuses to be boxed-in and defined by these expectations. He won't take shortcuts to ease his own struggle. He won't opt out of the laws of gravity and bypass what it means to be mortal. He won't grasp for raw power and buy into the same demonic system he's there to confront.

Because he knows who he is, and he knows what he is about.

Do we?

How easily do we allow ourselves to be boxed-in and defined by others? How often do we let ourselves be goaded into doing something that feels totally wrong for us? How many times have we let false praise tell us that we are entitled to privileges that others don't receive, or let abusive language tell us that we are unworthy of even being alive?

If you're like me, then the answer is: more times than we can count.

And when we lose ourselves in these ways, how do we find ourselves again?

We find ourselves by reconnecting with God—with the one who made us and claimed us, telling us “You are my beloved child.” It is in dialogue with God that we can be shaped into our truest, freest selves.

Four years ago, after the 2016 Presidential election, I knew that I was in peril of losing myself. In all the bitter vitriol of that election and its outcome, I could feel myself being sucked into the vortex of hate; and I knew, if I let myself hate—truly hate—someone, that I would be twisted into something I didn’t want to be. At the time, I was going to a really wonderful Spiritual Director—a Catholic nun named Judy, and I talked to her about my fear, wondering how I could resist that temptation to hate. She suggested that I try saying the Loving-Kindness Prayer.

Now, the Loving-Kindness Prayer comes out of the Buddhist tradition, so I love that this is a Roman Catholic nun recommending a Buddhist prayer to a Presbyterian minister, but I grabbed onto it like a lifeline.

In the version that she taught me, the prayer goes: “May I be free from fear, may I be free from suffering, may I have all that I need, may I be filled with loving-kindness.” You pray it first for yourself; then for a loved one; then for a stranger whom you know needs it; and finally, for an enemy.

I had to think through this, first, and do some theological translating. I had no qualms about asking to be free from fear, because we make our worst and least-loving decisions out of fear; but I had a hard time asking to be free from suffering. I wondered if, as a Christian, I had that right, until I interpreted it as being free from the *power* of suffering, just as Jesus didn't let suffering make him do things that weren't right for him.

As for asking to have everything I needed, I decided that that wasn't selfish as long as I left it up to God to decide what that was. Loving-kindness, though: that was a no-brainer. Who doesn't need to be filled with loving-kindness?

So I started praying that every day—for myself; for my loved-ones—which was easy, because I absolutely want them to have all of that; for a stranger in need of prayer, which was also easy; and for one I identified as enemy. I would move smoothly through the first four iterations, but then I always found myself taking a deep breath and letting it out before I moved into that final one, to create a kind of space between the people I cared about and *that person*. Or I did at first. Over time, I began to see that person differently. I realized how much of what they did was out of fear; and out of misery; and out of something deep that was clearly missing in their lives. In other words, over time, the prayer helped me to see that person as a human being, and to have at least some loving-kindness toward *them*.

I still pray that prayer. I still need to! I don't know that doing so has changed anybody else I'm praying for, but it's changed me. Spending that intentional time with God has reconnected me to the self I want to be. It's helped me to reclaim the compassion—the loving-kindness—that's there for each of us as a child of God.

So, fellow children of God: life can be a wilderness, and there are all sorts of demonic and damaging voices trying to tell you who you are, including, sometimes, your own unchecked thoughts and emotions. I pray that, when you find that happening, you will try and listen to a different voice—the voice of one who has traveled that same wilderness, and contended with those same voices, and somehow found his way through with his true self intact.

He's there for you. He's ready to listen, and he's ready to talk. Thanks be to God.

Invitation to Meditation

Over these weeks of Lent, we'll get to listen in on a series of conversations between Jesus and others, and, each week, we'll have time to converse with him ourselves, by spending time responding to a question he poses in scripture.

This week, the question is actually adapted a bit. In a few weeks, Jesus will ask Peter “Who do you say that I am?” This week, I invite to you imagine Jesus asking you: “Who do you say that *you* are?”

Who are you, when you are your best self? How do you define yourself?

- What are the relationships that make you who you are?
- What are your gifts, your skills, your most life-giving attributes?

In your bulletin is a colored piece of origami paper, and in the pews are some pens.

In the three minutes of silence that follow, please answer the question in words or symbols or pictures. Later, as we leave the service, please drop your paper in one of the baskets by the exits, and they will be origamied and hung up near the cross.

So: Jesus is standing with you; Jesus is speaking to you; Jesus is asking you:

“Who do you say that you are?” How will you answer?