

Luke 4:1-13
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First, Last, and Always

One step forward, three steps back...That was my feeling earlier in the week when I reread the gospel text for this morning. At the end of last Sunday, we had some momentum. On the heels of the shiniest “one shining moment” of them all on the mountaintop, we were moving with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We were just on the cusp of one of the crucial moments in Luke’s gospel when we are told that Jesus “sets his face for Jerusalem,” the moment when he turns fully and determinedly toward all that awaits him there.¹ And then the lectionary—the calendar of scripture passages that we and many other churches follow—abruptly yanks us back five chapters to these forty days in the wilderness. It reminds me of the pivotal moment in an action movie when the director decides that a flashback to the heroine’s childhood would be a good idea. Ugh. Really? Now?! Right when we’re almost to the good part?!

I did not grow up regularly giving up things or taking things on for Lent. I have a vague memory of giving up Diet Coke in high school. And some faithful episcopalian and catholic friends did in college. In seminary we took everything—including ourselves—very seriously, so I gave up and took on all the things in an attempt to be oh so holy, in the most well-meaning, bless-her-heart kind of way. I’d feel terribly guilty when I overslept my early morning devotion time or got behind on the book I had said I would read or ate the chocolate or drank the Diet Coke or said something I shouldn’t. After all, if Jesus could make it 40 days without food, you’d think I could make it 40 days without cursing or eating an Oreo. Guilt is probably one of the reasons I am tempted to dodge this text when it rolls around. I know full well that I am NOT

¹ Luke 9:51, NRSV

Jesus; I do not need Luke to remind me just how far I fall short. But what if that's not what this text is about? What if there is something more to Jesus' time in the wilderness than an invitation to beat ourselves up about how holy we are not?

Origin stories have been popular for decades. Who was Superman before he was Superman? Or Black Widow or Spiderman? We're fascinated by the fact that Michael Jordan was cut from his junior high basketball team. We savor behind-the-scenes stories of Lucy and Desi, of First Ladies, and of the cast of *Friends*. We're curious to know what shaped and influenced our heroes before they were heroes. What's in the secret sauce that shapes the ones who flourish against the odds? What tripped up the ones who had it all and lost it all? What happened? What made them that way?

Sarah Ramirez grew up as the daughter of migrant farmworkers in Pixley, California, a town mentioned by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

She went on to earn a Ph.D. at Stanford and become [her home county's] epidemiologist, where she noticed some troubling trends: high rates of diabetes and obesity, paired with widespread food insecurity.²

About ten years ago, Ramirez moved back to her hometown to run a grassroots organization that addresses food issues. And she gave up her prestigious job to do so. She now picks fruit and vegetables, just like her parents did:

Local food bank director, Sandy Beals says Ramirez's work is making a big difference.

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/12/19/255252581/this-stanford-ph-d-became-a-fruit-picker-to-feed-californias-hungry>

‘There is extreme unemployment, very high poverty and not a lot of hope that things will get better,’ Beals says. ‘And [Ramirez’s] goal is to give people hope. And hope is the most important thing people can have.’³

Growing up, Ramirez clearly learned the importance of community and of investing in that community. She was never defined by her degrees or her accolades. It seems that she found her identity and her purpose in helping others grow healthy and strong.

Ramirez appears to know her purpose. So does Jesus. I don’t know all of the ins and outs of Ramirez’s childhood. I cannot fully detail what makes her tick, although I can guess. We don’t have to guess with Jesus. Luke gives us all the information we need to understand how Jesus is who he is and how he does what he does when he tells the story of Jesus’ baptism.

Columnist David Brooks once wrote: “We are all fragile when we don’t know what our purpose is.”⁴ Fragility and vulnerability are not sins. We are fallible, vulnerable human beings.

Pretending we are not often leads to trouble. But I think Brooks has a different understanding of fragility in mind. Fragility for Brooks here means being untethered, unsteady, and unsure of who we are and what we are called to be and do. So, by Brooks’s definition, Jesus is not fragile. Jesus knows his purpose. Taunted to turn a stone into bread, Jesus digs deep into scripture to insist that human beings do not live by bread alone. It would be easy for us to claim that Jesus isn’t really hungry, that he is somehow above or beyond having such a mundane issue as a growling stomach, but Luke tells us, “He [is] famished.”⁵ This detail tells me that all three temptations are real temptations. Jesus is truly tempted, and Jesus is able to resist all three by drawing on the

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/12/19/255252581/this-stanford-ph-d-became-a-fruit-picker-to-feed-californias-hungry>

⁴ David Brooks, “Making Modern Toughness,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/30/opinion/making-modern-toughness.html>

⁵ Luke 4:2, NRSV

knowledge of what he is called to do AND the knowledge of who he is. He knows his purpose, AND he knows his identity. He knows without a doubt who and whose he is.

Just before Jesus is ushered into the wilderness, we hear God call Jesus his beloved son at his baptism. God declares that he is well pleased with him before Jesus has done anything of note. He is God's beloved Son, God's gift of love to and for the world. And the devil's temptations run entirely counter to that identity and that purpose. Each challenge is an invitation for Jesus to take care of himself, to look out for number one. Unlike Jesus' saving work which is intended for the entirety of creation, each proposition from the devil is directed solely at Jesus, taunting him to look out only for himself. And Jesus refuses by countering with sacred words woven deep into his spirit, words from ancient texts that he has heard over and over again in the synagogue, words that speak to a life of faith in the one true God and the life of faithfulness within the covenant community. Jesus' superpower—if we can call it that—is that knows who he is; he knows the faith that has shaped him; he knows who he is created and called to be. He is God's beloved son, first, last, and always. Nothing the devil can throw at him can change that.

Last Sunday and today we have had and will have the blessed gift of witnessing the confirmands make their public profession of faith. This morning, I will offer the same words to Emerson that I offered to her fellow confirmands, including this charge: "Remember your baptism and be thankful, and know that the Holy Spirit is at work within you." Do you hear that? The same words were whispered in Jesus' ears, too. Like Jesus, the confirmands are God's beloved children, first, last, and always. Like Jesus, we are God's beloved children, first, last, and always. We are not Jesus, of course. We will be tempted to look out for ourselves, to grasp at power, to play games with God's devotion, and we will give into those temptations on occasion. I know I have. I know I will again. Those temptations are more real than I like to admit, and

they are not confined to 40 days on the calendar. So I still don't think my past Lenten temptations—the chocolate, the cursing, the 40 bags of unneeded stuff in my closet—are really the point of these forty days, or at least not the primary point. What if instead we took these next few weeks to recall our own origin story? Wars are raging within and beyond our borders. Divisions are fierce and we are challenged daily to choose sides and wage wars of our own. If we haven't been already, we will be enticed to cut corners, to line our own pockets, to avoid those who make us uncomfortable, to denigrate our neighbors, to turn our backs on those who make us angry, and to save our own skin. It is tempting. Very tempting, at least for me, and I am guessing that I am not alone. I need some kind of sacred strength to keep me on the right track or to get me back on that track.

This text from Luke reminds me that Jesus' power lies not in some otherworldly superpower, but in his hanging on to that whisper. Jesus pays close attention to the voice that names him beloved in the gentle currents of the Jordan, the voice that declares him beloved on the mountaintop, the voice that walks with him back down into the valley, the voice that stirs him to set his face and his course for Jerusalem, not to save himself but to save us all. That voice whispers to us now and always, urging us beyond our temptations. The voice of the God's Spirit invites us to feast on bread that nourishes us body and soul, to trust the one power that can truly save us, and to worship the One who faithfully tends us and meets us not only at the top of the world but in the depths of the deepest valley. We hear constant reminders of that One in scripture. We sing praises of that One in hymns. We witness the saving power of that One in the waters of the font and in this feast. Perhaps over the next forty days through the work of the Holy Spirit we can listen to and for that voice again. Perhaps we can practice giving thanks both for abundant grace freely given and for living bread that sustains us all our days. And when we do,

that same Spirit will whisper and work to remind us again and again who we are and whose we are first, last, and always.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.