**A Matter of Loyalty** Sunday, February 16, 2016 (First Sunday in Lent)

When you hear this story of Jesus in the wilderness, what draws your attention first?

For many of us, it’s the figure of Satan. (You can almost hear the collective, horrified “ooooooooh” when the devil is mentioned)

It’s too easy to get distracted by mental images of a sinister figure in red, complete with pitchfork and horns, with an evil smile, rubbing his hands together with glee and murmuring “NOW I’ve got him right where I want him!”

We listen to the story of the temptations, and I suspect that what most of us pay attention to is the details of the temptations:

Are you hungry? Then use your power, and turn those stones into bread.

Worship me, and I can give you the whole world…anything you want or desire!

You claim to be the Son of God? Prove your title- throw yourself from the high point of the temple. If you are who you claim to be, God will rescue you!

We can get so caught up in looking at the details of the temptations, that we miss the main point of this whole event. Often, this story is seen as Jesus being tempted to use his power in selfish ways, being manipulated by the devil to reject his humanity, to feed himself, and grasp power and control.

But what is really being tested is Jesus’ loyalty to God.

One of the challenges for us in getting at the heart of stories in scripture is understanding the cultural context, the social structure, the images, ideas and traditions that were well known to the original readers, but which are foreign, strange and almost unknown to us. It’s why we rely on the work of biblical scholars, language scholars and anthropologists to help us understand what the world was like in Jesus’ day.

So, here are a couple of insights to help us understand what’s going on in this story of temptation in the wilderness.

In Israel’s tradition, the “Satan” is an adversarial figure of cosmic proportions who role is to test people’s loyalty to God. The “Satan”- the accuser, shows up in Job as the one who puts Job through trials and tribulations in order to test his loyalty to Israel’s God.

In the Gospel story, Jesus’ kinship loyalty is being tested. Jesus has just come from being baptized, and declared to be God’s own Son. The devil’s first challenge is to the claim of kinship to God, prefaced with “IF you are the Son of God…”

Jesus doesn’t answer with his own words. To do so would be to claim the honor from within himself. Instead he does what an honorable, Middle Eastern son would do, and responds from his family tradition, with the words of his true Father, r4ecorded in Deuteronomy 8:3: *one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Dt. 8:3)*

The second challenge issued, is for Jesus to “worship”…or more accurately translated “honor” … the devil rather than God. The term used here, in Middle Eastern culture of Jesus day referred to bowing down before a person and kissing the feet, the hem of the garment or the very ground on which that person walked.

The devil is basically placing himself in the position of being a broker- one with access to God’s favor and power which he (falsely) claims he can then bestow on Jesus. All Jesus has to do is “give the Devil his due”…at least, what the Devil claims is his due.

Jesus’ response again draws on the tradition of his kinship and the words of his true Father, from Deuteronomy 6: *Worship the Lord your God,
  and serve only him*

In true traditional, challenge-story style, a third and final challenge is issued. The devil once again challenges Jesus’ identity: “IF you are the Son of God…” and this time is clever enough to couch his challenge in the words of scripture:

*it is written,
 ‘He will command his angels concerning you,
  to protect you,’
11and
 ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
  so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ” (Psalm 91)*

It might be more accurate to say the devil only attempts to use scripture, because he- like many who misquote scripture- has ignored the context of his quotation. Psalm 91 promises the protection of God…

 *Because you have made the Lord your refuge,**\** *the Most High your dwelling-place, Ps.91:9*

God’s protection is promised in scripture to those who have placed themselves in God’s hands; those who have been loyal to the covenant relationship.

Jesus challenges this test of loyalty with the true words of God:

*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.* (Dt.6:16)

Having been bested quite decisively in his triple challenge, Luke tells us that the devil *“departed from him until an opportune time”*

A challenge such as this would have served no purpose if it was kept private. The writer of the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke made sure it was widely known, I suspect for a dual purpose.

Primarily, of course, because it is a strong assertion that Jesus is, in fact, who he claims to be: God’s own Son, sent to reveal the nature of God thought he witness of his own life, death and resurrection.

But it serves a second purpose as well. It is a model for us, in the face of the challenges we face about where our loyalties lie.

We face those challenges every day of our lives, in a wide variety of ways.

Pastor David Lose has called the devil’s challenges to Jesus a kind of attempt at identity theft, and he notes that we are subjected to attempts at stealing our identity as children of God and followers of Jesus every day.

In the US we are bombarded with advertising of bewildering proportions that attempts to convince us that we are not rich enough, not educated enough, not well-travelled enough, not dressed well enough, that our homes are not big enough or elegant enough; that what we possess, or how we dress or what car we drive, or how we look, or how much wealth we have accumulated are all measures of our value and worth; and those same standards then become the way we assess the value of others as well. The challenge to acquire the things that the world claims makes us valuable, and the mistaken belief that what we have all ours, is OUR test of loyalty.

We are challenged by Jesus’ example to recognize the challenges to our loyalty. Jesus’ defense against his challenges was deeply rooted in his understanding of scripture. If we lack a depth of familiarity and understanding of scripture, then we are left with poor defenses when our loyalty to God is challenged by the logic and rationale of the world.

Jesus emerged from his challenge confident in his identity and his dependence on God, to live a life that reflected his loyalty-even to the point of death, and beyond.

For us it’s a daily struggle- which we too often lose. But thanks be to God, we are forgiven and granted a new beginning each day. Hopefully, along the way, there are small victories which allow us to be vessels for the work of the Holy Spirit in our world and help us grow in our loyalty to God.

I’m going to suggest that one of the ways we can take the time of Lent this year to strengthen our identity as loyal children of God in a very tangible way, firmly and deeply rooted in God’s word, is heeding the words of Jesus in Matthew, and feeding the hungry of our world. The leaders of our congregation have committed us to being part of the ELCA’s 40 Days of Giving for World Hunger. Our mid-week offerings will go toward our pledge – but would you be willing to make an additional pledge, setting aside money you might otherwise use for non-essential purchases, in order to provide essential nutrition for hungry people- both in our own country and around the world? There are pink, Valentine pledge forms on the welcome desk in the atrium. They’re not intended to be turned in for anyone else to see. They are for you to take home and post to remind yourself to make a gift of love that asserts your loyalty to God and asserts that you “*Worship the Lord your God,and serve only him.”*