

“Until an Opportune Time”
Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Lent 1

Psalm 91

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
²will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”

⁹Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.

¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Luke 4:1-13

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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.

³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

⁹Then 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, ¹⁰for 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.’” ¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Prayer

O God, we come to you aware of the power of your judgement,
trusting in the predominance of your love.

We lift up to you ourselves and all who are in distress,
and those who have gone astray,

and those who are not well,
and all who have been victimized by addiction
to substances or other things
that affect mind, spirit, emotional state, or physical body.

And we trust you, O God,
knowing that you loved us into existence,
and that you see us through its challenges and its beauties,
not just to pursue some arbitrary, punitive judgement,
but to saturate us as you saturate this world—
your whole world of heaven *and* earth—
with healing and forgiveness and hope.

This is your love, O God.
This is your cross, borne for us, O God.
This is your Son born for us, O God.

Help us to look for and find and see and recognize him,
in one another,
in all your children,
and in the face we see in the mirror. Amen.

The Sermon

We are not possessed by any demon or devil or satanic power.

We're not.

But the things we sometimes call our “private demons” feel so personal:

our illnesses, physical, mental and otherwise, that distort our perception,
and the way our brains work, and the ways we interact with people;

and our weaknesses for the countless things we use as drugs: money, food, sex, alcohol, power, abusive behavior (if our out-of-whack desires for these things, weren't "weaknesses," overcoming them as we do wouldn't take such herculean strength);

and the worst of what we can be and do—the fear-based hatreds that we dress up as political opinion; the abandonment of the teachings of Jesus Christ based on our preferred economic and demographic theories that emphasize my right to get whatever I can, keep whatever I want, and do whatever I feel like;

and all the evil impulses that pulsate from somewhere deep within—the fantasies of violence and covetousness, and of how the world would be so much "better" if I could just be rid of all the people I don't like, or trust, or want to have to deal with anymore.

We are not possessed by any demon or devil or satanic power. But these private demons we carry around seem so *personal*.

They say, "I know you're hungry, and I know what you're hungry *for*."

And you and I both know we're not just talking about bread.

Well, what if I told you that you could take anything you want?

You can conjure ways to satisfy your craving, to the point that you don't have to care about anything else."

And Jesus quoted a writing that said,

"People live on a lot more than just the things that we hunger for."

What do you say, when those private demons encourage you to take whatever your basest hunger is for, even if you have to conjure it

artificially from something that had had its own reality—like turning a stone into bread,

or, turning somebody else’s marriage into your own playground, say,

or taking God’s good balance of creation and converting it to plastic pollution and mass extinctions so you can enjoy yourself without concern?

Or taking trusting, caring people, and turning them into means to your own ends?

But humanity doesn’t just live on things that meet our animal desires.

Those inner demons also like to say: “I can set you up in extravagant circumstances that right now, you only dream about. Wouldn’t you like that? In your heart of hearts, don’t you want that, as much as anything in the world? Wouldn’t you like to have it that way—all that power; all that money—even just for a day? Even just for an hour?”

“I can take you to the mountaintop and show you every luxury in the world. And I can give you unlimited resources—Hey, you’re a good person! I bet you’d do some good with it; more than you are able to do now. Between you and me: I’ll bet God would love you even more for that.

“And so would the media. And so would the world.

“There is a way. You could take, and have, everything. You just have to promise not to care about *anybody*. Not even God. But think of all the good you could do.”

And Jesus quoted another source that said, “Worship and serve only God.”

In the face of hurricane winds of temptation—and we are, all of us in this room (and I know we each have our struggles, some of them dire), but globally speaking, we are people of enormous privilege and opportunity—

in the face of temptation, with much less restriction than billions of other people in this world: when the temptation comes to cut corners and write the good of others out of the equation in order to advance our share, what do *you* say?

And those private demons of ours like to say,

“You’re a person of God. You know God loves you. Why don’t you go ahead and engage in self-destructive behavior. Like jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Didn’t you hear the choir anthem? It’s a psalm! It’s in the Bible!

“For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

So why not go for it?

And Jesus quoted something that had been said: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Which reads to me like: “Who do you think you are, to treat God like your private bodyguard?”

When the opportunity for self-destructive behavior is right there, and you could even claim later that God gave you a miracle to preserve your life—that’s worth a pretty good book deal!—what do you say?

Or maybe more appropriately, what do you do?

We are not possessed by any demon or devil or satanic power. We’re really not. It’s harder than that:

We have to make our own choices.

Every year at the beginning of Lent, I offer a series of questions formulated by Frederick Buechner, who wrote some decades ago:

“In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year’s income to some holy use. For Christians to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year’s days. After being baptized..., [Jesus went into] the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.”ⁱ

And so I invite you into the Lenten journey, and offer you a moment to ponder:

“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 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?”ⁱⁱ

The Devil—Satan, *ha-Satan*, “the Satan,” the Tempter—finished proctoring the exam. Jesus, the examinee, had passed every test that had been thrown at him. The proctor clicked his heels and gave a courteous little bow acknowledging the test-taker’s achievement, and maybe even gave a slight nod to show respect for the fact that he had done it in a state of famished fasting.

And he turned and departed from Jesus—until an opportune time.

Luke tells us there will be an opportune time, the bookend on the other end of the earthly, human, embodied ministry into which Jesus has just been initiated.

It will come at a place on the Mount of Olives, when Jesus is in prayer, while disciples are asleep.

And the unspoken examination for Jesus at that time will say:

“You have come here to be God: reaching out to enfold creation, to enfold humankind, to wrap each human being in God’s embrace, to overcome our estrangement from God.

“You have come to save humanity, at the greatest cost to your life.

“Will you take that cup, or not?”

But that time won't come for a while yet.

This is just the beginning of Jesus' earthly, incarnate ministry in his own physical body—atoms which have long since returned to creation's natural cycle of decay and rearrangement. You may have one or two of those atoms in your body right now, in the water you drink or the bread you eat.

For now, the tempter has departed from him until an opportune time, and now that Jesus has passed the initiation into ministry, there is so much to do:

so much food to share with so many hungry people;
so much healing in a world of such woundedness;
so much restoration in the midst of so much that is broken;
so much beauty and truth to teach, in a universe built on almost unimaginably good news.

So now, the questions are on the disciples:

Will I go and do this ministry with him?

And will I still be there when the opportune time comes around?

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”

“Those who love me, I will deliver,” says your Creator.

“When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.
And I will show them my salvation.”

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ⁱ Frederick Buechner, “Lent,” in Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (Harper San Francisco, 1988), 74-75

ⁱⁱ Buechner, “Lent,” 74-75