

# **The First Sunday in Lent**

## **Questions for Jesus: Why Not?**

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### **Luke 4:1-13**

In Judith Guest's novel, *Ordinary People*, one character is a middle-aged man going through a classic mid-life crisis. Confused and adrift, every time he overhears a conversation in an elevator or a restaurant that begins, "Now I'm the kind of person who...", he tunes in, hoping to learn some wisdom. But he never does. Finally he admits, "I'm the kind of man who hasn't got the foggiest idea what kind of man I am." I can identify with that. In these days with so much information, so many demands, so many conflicting points of view, so many expectations bombarding us, it is easy to lose touch with who we are, what we believe, what we stand for. Some nights I go home and plop in a chair, thoroughly confused, feeling much like the man who was described as getting on a horse and riding off in all directions at once, like a man who doesn't have the foggiest idea...

But then there is High Thompson. Ever heard of him? I might have mentioned him before from this pulpit. On March 16, 1968, Thompson was a young helicopter pilot flying on patrol over the countryside of Vietnam. When he and his crew flew over the village of My Lai, he saw a horrific nightmare unfolding below him. He saw U.S. Army troops, under the constant pressure of danger and the madness of war, who had completely lost their discipline, reason and humanity. He saw troops slaughtering unarmed civilians – old men, women and children. Over 500 had already been killed. He set the helicopter down between the troops and the remaining villagers, got out, and at great risk to himself, confronted the officer in charge, Lt. William Calley. He then airlifted out the few civilians still alive and radioed in a full report. All military actions in the My Lai area were halted. Many of you no doubt recall the controversy and heated debate that followed that incident.

In the spring of 2004, High Thompson was given an honorary degree by Emory University in Atlanta. At that time he spoke to the question on everyone's minds. How did he find the moral courage and strength to do what he did that day at My Lai. His answer surprised many of those in attendance. "I'd like to thank my mother and father for trying to instill in me the difference between right and wrong. We were country people. I was born and raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia. We had very little, but one thing we did have was the Golden Rule. My parents taught me early, 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.' That's why I did what I did that day. It's hard to put certain things into words. You're going to have to make many decisions in your life. Please make the right decisions because we're depending on you. God bless you all."

High Thompson took action when no one else would. Why did he do what he did? Where did he find the moral courage? According to him, it came from words taught to him in childhood, repeated over and over: "Do unto others....do unto others....do unto others." In his time of testing, he remembered who he was, what he stood for, what mattered most.

"If you are really the long-awaited Messiah," said Satan, "let's see some sign of it. I know you must be hungry after forty days out here in the wilderness. And there certainly are lots of other hungry people in the world. So, turn these stones into bread. After all, what could be more compassionate, more godly, than having mercy and providing food for hungry people?"

Jesus responds, "It is written, we shall not live by bread alone."

"Feeding the hungry doesn't appeal to you? Well, I can understand that. Feed them today and they are hungry again tomorrow. You want to think long term. I know just the ticket...politics. Here, I've laid out before you all the kingdoms of the world. I will give you control over all of them. (interesting how Satan controls the world of power and politics...surprised?) Think of the power you would have to make positive changes. All you have to do is recognize my authority and worship me."

But Jesus responds, "It is written, we shall worship only one God."

"Well, Jesus, if you won't show a little compassion for the hungry and if you don't care about using your power to make the world a better place, then at least show some concern for those struggling to believe. Show the people in the pews just who you are. Leap from the tower and then stand before them unmarked and uninjured. If that won't get them to believe in you, nothing will."

And Jesus replies, "It is written, you shall not tempt the Lord your God." And the Devil departs until a more opportune time. The testing seemingly never ends.

The season of Lent always begins with Jesus out in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. His hair is still wet from his baptism, the words of the heavenly voice are still ringing in his ears, and he finds himself alone – forty days and nights in the wilderness.....no sign of God at all. No dove. No voice from heaven. Just him, the desert, and, yes, Satan.

I mentioned that moment in Vietnam when High Thompson discovered who he really was. Perhaps that is what the wilderness is for Jesus. I have no interest in getting literal about whether or not it was really Satan out there. As one colleague has said, "The scene before us is not a cartoon of Jesus debating some horned creature with a fiendish face who smells of sulfur. Jesus is wrestling with the will of God for the ministry now before him." There, in the wilderness, Jesus really is face to face with himself. How would God's beloved behave? As he moved out into the world, what would he say, what would he do, what would he stand for and against?

I wonder, as you listen, does this familiar story stir anything in you; remind you of your own quiet, lonely vulnerable times, times when it really did feel like the devil – or something – was nipping at your heels and you wondered why God had left you stranded and alone in your own wilderness?

And how does Jesus respond? He says simply, "It is written..." In the moment of testing, when he is pushed against the wall, when his call and loyalty are questioned, Jesus is able to hold on to his own soul. He will not sell himself to the highest bidder, no matter how great the offer. Something has laid claim to him, has given clarity to his commitments. "It is written..." Much like High Thompson that fateful day at My Lai, Jesus refuses to live any story other than God's story, to follow any script for his life other than the one found in God's word. Jesus is presented with a devilishly tempting path to glory, but he chooses another.

And on this first Sunday of our Lenten journey, we already know just how challenging that path will be. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "This is the story in which everyone finds out what being the son of God really means. This is the story in which Jesus proves who he is, not by seizing power but by turning it down. God's beloved will not practice magic. He will not ask for special protection or seek political power. As much as it may surprise everyone, including himself, he will remain human, accepting all the usual risks. It is, after all, the only way humans will ever learn what 'son of God – child of God' really means. A child of God is not someone who is related to God by rising out of his or her humanity, but someone who is beloved by God for sinking into it even when he is famished, even when she is taunted by the devil himself. It is someone who can listen to every good reason in the world for becoming God's rival and remain God's child instead."

And so I hope we begin to see that even as this text is very much a story about Jesus, it also quite easily becomes a story about us. It speaks directly to a people and a church whose own faithfulness is forged and challenged again and again in the wilderness, a place that is not perhaps so much out there in the world as it is in here, within the human heart, in the depths of the human spirit. For always there is that devilish voice in our heads saying things like, "If you are a child of God, shouldn't things be going a little easier, a little smoother, for you? If God is a real God, then shouldn't he be making you happier, healthier, richer and safer? Maybe if you worshiped me..."

And always there is the response and example of Jesus: "It is written..." In him we see that life is more than bread and money and power. It is what you are fashioning in your soul, the kind of person you are becoming, the values you cherish, the reach of your mind, the integrity that flows from the clarity of your commitments, the ways in which you touch the lives of others and of your world. Not so much how you make a living, as how you make a life.

So when we hear the temptingly devilish voice in our own wilderness place, as we inevitably will, what will we say? One colleague has this suggestion: "Say this: 'Away with you Satan! For I would rather be a hungry child of God than a well-fed player on your team. So get out of here!'" And if we can manage that, as hard as it is, there is a good chance that we will hear another voice in our head before long, far more beautiful and hopeful than the first, a voice whispering to our very souls, "You are my beloved child, my chosen, in whom I am well pleased."