



Satan and the Unending Questions

TEXT
Luke 4:1–13

September 17, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Before Jesus faces temptation, he is baptized. I assume Jesus would have been tempted whether he was baptized or not, but his baptism changes the matter. John the Baptist meets him in the Jordan, and the scripture says a voice from heaven spoke to Jesus. It doesn't appear anyone else heard it. That's always the case with a voice from heaven: It's never loud enough for a whole room to hear. God says to Jesus, "You are my son." Some people will call him other names. Some will call him by lofty names — like shepherd or teacher or even messiah. Others will name him a blasphemer, or even enemy of the state. But who Jesus is at his core is God's son. He belongs to God. That's the promise of his baptism.

That's the promise of your baptism as well. Baptism doesn't make you belong to God. Baptism just celebrates what is always and already true — you belong to God. We claim that promise today for Oliver and Charlotte, for Wells and Harry, for Colin and Jackson and Lincoln. They are God's children. Since all of

them are a year old or younger, they won't remember today. They don't know the significance of what we do today, but someday they will. Someday they will need to remember that they belong to God. It's our job to make sure they remember who they are.

It sounds silly, but the truth is, one of the challenges in this life is to remember that we belong to God. That is who we are.

I think Jesus had to remember who he was. In this series, "It Takes a Village," I am looking at others who helped Jesus be Jesus; those who helped him discover or recognize who he was called to be as God's Son. As strange as it may sound, today I want to suggest that Satan helped Jesus to be Jesus.

After Jesus' baptism, he is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he is tested. In between the baptism and the testing, Luke tells us the genealogy of Jesus. The point is hard to miss.

In Matthew's gospel, the genealogy of Jesus comes at the very beginning: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of ... and on it goes.

But Luke lifts the genealogy from the beginning and

drops it right between Jesus' baptism and his temptation. To be sure, neither the genealogy in Matthew nor in Luke will stand up to historical scrutiny. You won't find these on ancestry.com. But that is not the point. The point is to say both baptism and temptation are about who Jesus is. This is about his identity. He is the Son of God.

The Greek word for tempted is *peirazo*, and the dictionary definition is "to test or tempt to discover what kind of person someone is."¹ The testing of Jesus is to determine what kind of person he is.

Satan said, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread."

What does he mean "if you are the Son of God"? It sounds like Satan is trying to create some doubt, make Jesus feel insecure. *What do you mean "if" I am the Son of God? Do you think I'm wrong about that? What if I am not the Son of God?*

We might react this way because so many of us know what it is to feel insecure. We know about self-doubt.

But that's not what is going on. Satan knows Jesus is God's Son. The tempter is not trying

to attack Jesus' confidence. He wants to change Jesus' behavior. The only thing worse than the Son of God doubting that he is the Son of God is to know he *is* the Son of God, but fails to act like it.

What makes it even more challenging is the testing always seems reasonable. Turn these stones into bread. What can be wrong with that? Jesus is hungry. And feeding the hungry is something Jesus would do. Why not now?

There's a longer explanation for that, but for this morning, let me just say that testing wouldn't be difficult if doing the wrong thing seemed unreasonable. No, what makes the test so difficult is how easy it is to justify doing the wrong thing. People seldom do what they believe is wrong. We do what we believe is right. We have an amazing capacity to work out in our minds why something is really not that bad, or our only option, or simply must be done in this circumstance.

If it doesn't seem reasonable, it's not really a test. The real test of faith is when that which is inconsistent with our calling as Christians seems reasonable. We have to choose to act like we belong to God.

And the truth is, those questions, those moments and even seasons of testing are unending.

If I understand the text, when we are tested, when we face adversity — sometimes those are the circumstances that teach us what kind of people we are. To say it more on point, sometimes when the

Christian way of life seems most out of step with what is presented as reasonable in the culture, we have to remember that we are God's children and called to live as such.

In testing, we have to choose what kind of people we will be. You as an individual, and also as a church family, do that all the time.

In the middle of the last century, when the winds of civil rights were blowing across the South, the church was tested. Every church had to determine what kind of people we would be. Dr. Bob Meneilly, with no small amount of courage and more than a few sleepless nights, inspired many — but certainly not all — to stand against the neighborhood restrictions that prohibited Jews and blacks from living in our communities. Some accused him of meddling in politics. They weren't wrong. It was political. But first it was a moral question. It was about what kind of people we would be. In the face of moral concerns, if the church refuses to follow Christ, then who will?

We face similar struggles today. Nazi flags are waved in our nation. They are marching in the streets in St. Louis — most peacefully, but not all. Police officers are courageously striving to keep the peace. The anger is understandable, it seems to me. If you are young and black, it is not clear what circumstances must exist for it to be against the law to shoot you. It is unreasonable to ask our African American brothers and sisters to accept that.

This is a different day than the 1960s, but not different enough. We are not as free from societal racism as we assumed we were.

But I confess I lack clarity on exactly what to do about that. We need more than marches. We have learned that the hard work by many people of good will has failed to produce the fruit of reconciliation that we assumed we could reach. Perhaps we have failed to take seriously the severity of injury that racism has caused over hundreds of years. But more importantly, I fear we have been naive about how this is not simply a problem of policy or economics, although it is surely that. It is also a problem of sin, and I fear we all are captured by it. We all struggle to see the full humanity of those who are not like us. And we are captured by a fear of each other, and fear is almost never the right place to make our best ethical decisions.

I don't think anyone wants the kind of pain and division and suspicion that exists in our nation today. And people of faith should speak against that. But we should also confess in humility that speaking against it, while not without consequence, is the easier part.

I am praying every day for clarity, for these feel like testing days to me — days when we need to remember who we are.

The truth is, the testing days are unending for people of faith. That's why it is important to remember the promise and calling of your baptism.

There was a Session meeting in 2006. Elders entered the room quietly. Almost overnight, our neighbors had placed in their yards signs that said, "Village Church, respect thy neighbor."

We aren't used to our neighbors thinking poorly of us. It was an awkward place to be. We knew we had to do something. There is a lot of misinformation out there. There were only a few folks who were intentionally sharing misinformation. Others were just passing on what they heard from their neighbors. But the tidal wave was building.

There were a variety of responses that seemed reasonable. But some asked, "What does the gospel require of us in this moment?"

Someone then said: "I think we need to forgive in advance. We need to remember that there are more people in this community who would be proud of such a ministry that feeds the hungry than those who would oppose it. We need to remember that those who are opposed to us are still our neighbors. Now is the time for us to trust what the gospel teaches us about how to respond to neighbors." It felt risky, but that's what we did.

Before it was all over, those who filed a lawsuit not only dropped the lawsuit, they brought produce from their gardens to be used in our pantry. And some who spoke against us have joined as volunteers.

But it is important to say this: There was no guarantee

it would work out that way. It might have just continued to spiral downward, but all we could control is what kind of people we were going to be.

Jesus learned that sometimes testing is when we get clear about who we are and how we are to live.

I think Luke passes the story on to us because the same is true for you and me. None of us will escape the season of testing. When it comes to you, and it will, remember the promise of your baptism. You are the children of God, and there is no power in heaven or earth that can pull you from God's love. And remember the calling of your baptism: Seek to live that love in all that you say and do.

¹Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 640

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.