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“Identity Theft”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

First Sunday in Lent (Year A)

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Matthew 4:1-11

In the blink of an eye, Jesus’ life changed. For thirty years, he had been living the life of a faithful Jewish carpenter, minding his own business, as far as we know from Matthew. Until John the Baptist showed up on the scene. We don’t know *why* Jesus went to him to be baptized. We just know that Jesus left Galilee and showed up at the Jordan River to see John. John balked at first, but then consented, holding Jesus as he went under the swirling waters and then bringing him back up into the light. What happened next was beyond comprehension, of course. The heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove, alighting on Jesus. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.”

And suddenly Jesus knows. He knows who he is. He knows he is God’s Son. In the waters of baptism, God has given him his full identity. And in our passage for today, he gets his first chance to live into that identity.

I find it interesting that the first way God helps Jesus live into his identity is by leading him into the wilderness to be tempted. Any sensible person might have stayed away from that kind of temptation. But Jesus was God’s Son, and as a first act of understanding his identity as such, he trusted God and followed the Spirit into the wilderness.

Like any good Jew, Jesus prepared himself by fasting. Forty days and forty nights he fasted, just as Moses did, as an act of devotion. The number forty connects

Jesus with a long line of God's chosen people—Noah, Moses, David, the Israelites in the wilderness. At the end of the forty days, Jesus is weak and famished. A perfect time for the devil to begin his string of temptations. And from the first question, the devil challenges Jesus' identity. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to be loaves of bread." He tempts Jesus to question his relationship with God and to prove it for himself.

Each time the devil tempts him, though, Jesus responds with a passage from Deuteronomy. In doing so, Jesus stands on his faith and the faith of his ancestors. He turns his face before God, who has named and claimed him as his own. He gives up all that the world calls good—fame, power, wealth, recognition—He trusts in God and finds his joy and peace in God. Had he not been strong enough to live into his identity here in the wilderness, he never would have been strong enough to journey to the cross and offer himself for our salvation through his ultimate act of love.

This passage is entirely about Jesus and the tests that he endured, his trust in God, and how that prepared him for the rest of his journey. But this passage also has something very important to say to the people of God—to you and me and to all of us as a community of faith. Tom Long reflects:

This story is about the kind of trials and testings that happen to people—to Israel, to Jesus, to the church—when they are called to be God's people and to do God's work in the world. The testing of Jesus, the testing of Israel before him, and the testing of the church today are not primarily temptations to do what we would really like to do, but know we should not; they are temptations to *be* someone other than who God calls us to be, to deny that we are God's children.¹

When we understand ourselves as God's children, we face the world in a very different way. We are not so naïve that we do not realize that there are great temptations all around: daily temptations to judge others, to seek power and recognition, to put our trust in money or the things we own, to react in anger

¹ Matthew, pp. 36-37.

toward someone we love, to have strong negative feeling against those who think differently, or act differently, than we do. We face daily temptations to neglect the care of the earth, to hoard our possessions, and to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We talk ourselves into reasons why we can stray from the straight and narrow. “No one will notice. No one will care. I’m not strong enough to resist. Everyone does it anyway.” But in making these excuses, we have forgotten whose children we are. We are God’s children, and when we rest in God’s arms of grace and trust in God’s promises of mercy, we don’t need to seek peace and reassurance and comfort in other places. Real peace and reassurance and comfort come only from God, the one who forgives us and calls us back into the fold every time we turn to the world and allow our identity to be stolen once again. God is here and God waits for us with incredible patience, for though we forget who we are, God *never* forgets.

The Lord of the Rings is a three-book tale about a young hobbit named Frodo and his band of friends who end up on a very important journey. Their commission is to destroy the ring of power, a ring that Frodo’s Uncle Bilbo discovered on his own adventures quite accidentally. The ring becomes Frodo’s burden to carry—no one else seems quite able to resist the incredible temptation of the ring, which converts pure good into pure evil in almost a blink of an eye. These books recount a journey in which the band of friends, known as the “Fellowship of the Ring,” encounter evil in many forms, are rescued by good along the way, and battle the temptation of the ring that hangs around Frodo’s neck. In Book One, at the beginning of what will be a very long and dangerous journey, Frodo remembers the words of his Uncle Bilbo, who reminded him regularly that:

... there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door,” he used to say. “You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”²

When I first read this passage, I understood that Bilbo was speaking of adventure and the way adventure could lurk around every corner. After all, Bilbo had had so

² Book 1, chapter 3 “Three is company”

many adventures of his own. But after completing the trilogy, I understood these words in a very different way. Bilbo was warning Frodo of the powerful temptations along life's way, temptations to leave one path and choose another, temptations to lose one's self and become another, temptations to wealth and power beyond imagination, and temptations to turn away from truth, light, and goodness and to turn toward distortion, darkness, and evil.

Tolkien scholar Ralph Wood writes:

Tolkien's work is imbued with a deep mystical sense of life as a journey or quest that carries one, willy-nilly, beyond the walls of the world. To get out of bed, to answer the phone, to open the door, to fetch the mail—such everyday deeds are freighted with eternal consequence. They immerse us in the river of time: the “ever-rolling stream” which, in Isaac Watts’s splendid rendering of the 90th Psalm, “soon bears us all away.” From the greatest to the smallest acts of courage and cowardice, we travel irresistibly on the path toward ultimate joy or final ruin.³

Friends in Christ, as followers of Jesus, we are on a dangerous path. Like it or not, our path is fraught with temptation at every turn. But as followers of Jesus, we also know this: we are not alone. We are on the path together, and God leads the way. We are on a difficult road, but Christ has traveled it before us and travels it now beside us. In his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus stayed the path, claiming his identity, preparing us to claim our own.

This Lenten season, *we* are called and encouraged to stay the path. We are invited to examine the voices in the world that attempt to steal our identity as a child of God and attempt to whisk us off the one true path that is life, that is hope. And so we are invited during this season of Lent to fast and pray, to meditate on scripture so much that it becomes a part of who we are and how we relate to the world and how we understand God and ourselves. We are invited to find a quiet place and

³ Dr. Ralph Wood, Professor of English at Baylor University, is a Tolkien expert and has studied Christian literary classics and the Inklings (the close group of Oxford literary masters including C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and Tolkien). He taught for 26 years at Wake Forest University, where he won awards for distinguished teaching. His publications include “Traveling the One Road: The Lord of the Rings as a ‘Pre-Christian’ Classic,” *Christian Century* 110, 6 (February 24, 1993): 208-11.

listen, whether it is in the corner of our own room, or whether it is the ten minutes we find to stare out the window, hearing the pure sound of songbirds for the first time all day. In these quiet, Lenten places, away from the shouting and noise of the world, God invites us to hear another voice, one ultimately stronger than any others, one just waiting for us to want to hear it. God's own voice. And when it comes, and our identity becomes clear, our joy becomes complete and we are ready to withstand any temptation that the world might offer to us.

God's own voice, saying to us all:

“You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.”

May we not forget our identity as such.

To God be the glory. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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