



Rev. George Ragsdale
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13
February 21, 2010

In June 1973, the attention of most Americans was captivated by the ever-unfolding story of Watergate. There was a botched break-in at the opposition's campaign headquarters and then a coverup with hush money and abuse of power and privilege that seemed to reach into the upper echelons of the Nixon White House. The Senate held hearings, chaired by North Carolina's own Sam Ervin, and gradually the truth began to emerge about what had happened. The underlying question remained, however – what had Richard Nixon known himself? Finally the President's chief counsel, John Dean, appeared before the committee and in the most dramatic moment of the entire affair, Howard Baker, the vice chairman of the committee, cut through all the evasive answers and legalisms and asked Dean, point blank, in words that many of you probably remember quite well: "What did the President know, and when did he know it?"

I wasn't there, obviously, but I imagine that when he asked the question it was as if all the air was sucked out of the committee room, because in that question hung the balance of Richard Nixon's political career, the fate of his administration, and in many ways the fate of American democracy itself. Everyone wanted to know the answer out of curiosity. Everyone needed to know the answer because, in some way, what Richard Nixon *knew* said something about who we were, who we had become as a nation. "What did the President know, and when did he know it?"

This morning, in Luke's Gospel, we read about Jesus in the wilderness. He goes there to fast and pray, and he stays there for 40 days and nights. The wilderness – the desert – is a forsaken place with little capacity for sustaining life. The desert was surely not a place where Jesus wanted to be. Luke says he was "led up by the Spirit," while Mark says the Spirit "drove him out." Jesus goes into the wilderness not because he wants to see what it's like or to test out his new L.L. Bean sleeping bag, but because God, through the Spirit, wants him there.

Just before this, God had appeared to Jesus at his Baptism and revealed: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Through his Baptism, Jesus finds out for himself that he is God's son, but there are no immediate miracles. There is no teaching. There is no healing. There is only wilderness. The Spirit sends – the Spirit forces – Jesus away with this new knowledge about who he is to fast and pray – to think things through.

We face in this passage one of those questions on which *everything* seems to hinge – a lot like the one posed by Howard Baker to John Dean in 1973. What did Jesus know, and *when* did he know it? What did Jesus know – about himself – and when did he know it? Sure, at his baptism he knew that he was God's son. But what did that mean? What would that mean? How would he live? How would he die?

Growing up I was a "PK," a "Preacher's Kid." There were all kinds of stereotypes about how the "Preacher's Kid" would act, and I sensed that there were also all kinds of expectations for what the "Preacher's Kid" was *supposed* to be like. Beyond sitting quietly and attentively on the first row *every* Sunday, I don't think I ever quite figured out what it meant to be the "Preacher's son." I've never quite figured out what it means to be my father's son. And Jesus is *God's* son? I can see why the Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus needed the wilderness to figure out who Jesus was.

In the wilderness Jesus is alone. As Henri Nouwen puts it, this solitude is a way of “getting ridding of the scaffolding”¹ so that there is nothing to distract, nothing to fall back on. In the wilderness Jesus is with *Jesus*: forced to confront the realities of who he is. His only companion is God in Heaven. In his solitude he can fix his gaze on God, know God, and know himself.

What did Jesus know? He knew that he was God’s son at least from the time of his baptism. He really knew it, though, after those 40 days and nights when, alone, he confronts what it really means to be God’s son.

Then Satan appears. There is little time for small talk—Satan gets right to the point. He has come to test Jesus: To challenge his understanding of who he is. Satan shows Jesus another way, much different from God’s way. It is very tempting, and it challenges something we’ve pretty much taken for granted for the last 2,000 years. It challenges Jesus’ understanding of the very will of God.

Just look at the things Satan suggests and offers to Jesus. None of them sound terribly wrong. In fact, most of them sound pretty good. Satan says, “Look at all these stones, Jesus. There are a lot of hungry people in the world. Think what you could do if you made these stones into bread.” Or, “throw yourself down off the Temple. God will send angels and they will save you and everyone will believe in you. You won’t even have to preach a sermon!” Finally, “Imagine what you could do with power. All the kingdoms of the world can be yours.”

Even the most pious among us would’ve probably bought at least one of them. Jesus has spent the last 40 days in the wilderness and he’s got a pretty good idea of who, as God’s son, he’s supposed to be. Stones into bread sounds like good economics – but Jesus knows that as the Son of God he must be concerned with more than just our physical well-being. A demonstration of power would’ve saved him a lot of time – but I think Jesus knew that as the Son of God he would have to demonstrate a lot more than power – he would have to demonstrate love. The kingdoms of this world would’ve been much easier, but Jesus – the Son of God – knows that he must rely on God and God alone. These temptations were about so much more than right or wrong. They were about who Jesus, as God’s Son, really was. There, in the wilderness, being tempted by the Devil himself, Jesus knew who he was.²

This is the First Sunday of Lent, a time when the church remembers Jesus’ time in the wilderness and the temptations he endured. As a student in elementary school, I was first exposed to the idea of doing without something I loved during Lent. The idea was to remove it as a distraction in life in order to come closer to God. This was all well and good for a fourth-grader. I gave up chocolate, but with minimal success, especially on Fridays when the school cafeteria let us have chocolate milk. I hated plain milk and my Lenten promise was quickly forgotten as I passed through the lunch line. I’ve been trying to give something up during Lent ever since. One year it was coffee. This year I’m trying television. I have to confess, though – I’m not above looking for loopholes, even splitting a few hairs. I joked with somebody and said I was giving up mindless television and they said, “So you’re giving up television.”

I can’t help but wonder if often we lose our focus when we think about the disciplines of Lent. We turn them into these trivial morality games that somehow reduce our concept of temptation. But temptation is about more than right or wrong. Temptation is about more than morality. For Jesus, in the wilderness, temptation is about more than all of that because it is all about identity. “If you are the Son of God,” Satan says. For Jesus, temptation isn’t about black

² Gomes, Peter. “First Sunday in Lent,” *Proclamation 6*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. 29-31.

or white, right or wrong – Satan is there trying to make him doubt who he is. The preacher Elizabeth Johnson says it’s Satan trying to get Jesus to be Jesus without the cross.³ Who will you be, Jesus? Who are you?

That’s the way temptation hits us, too, isn’t it? The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says that when those yearnings and longings hit us in the middle of Lent they are not a sign that we need chocolate or red wine. They are, she says, a sign that something in us is of God – calling out, crying out for God.⁴ The question of Lent, the question of life – is who or what will we let fill those longings? Who will we be? Who are we?

It’s hard to do that. It’s hard to follow the Spirit. It’s hard because to do so means being in the wilderness on *God’s terms*. This is our calling during Lent: To follow the Spirit and be alone with God to struggle with the tough questions of who we are. Frederick Buechner suggests what some of these Lenten questions might be like. He writes:

“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? Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would 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?”⁵

During Lent we are asked to embrace questions like those Buechner poses for us and struggle with answers to them. In the struggle we will be led, maybe even forced, on a journey through the wilderness with the perfect companion and example: Jesus Christ. The great miracle of this story is, of course, that Jesus, with the full knowledge of who he was and what that entailed, came out of the desert. He embarks on a journey that is forever shaped by what he learned out there alone, day in and day out. His journey can speak to us on our journey, reminding us of his obedience even to the point of death.

After the wilderness, in his moments of strength and weakness – in his moments of doubt and certainty – Jesus knew who he was. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”⁶ What did Jesus know? He knew, *really knew*, he was God’s son. In the end, it was all he really needed – all we really need – to know.

³ Johnson, E. Elizabeth, "Temptation," *Journal for Preachers*, 2004

⁴ Taylor, Barbara Brown, "Settling for Less," *The Christian Century*, 1998.

⁵ Buechner, Frederick. "Lent." *Listening to Your Life*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992. 56.

⁶ Matthew 26.39b.