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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

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TEMPTED

Southern novelist Eudora Welty was described as often setting her characters outside of their communities, in situations that would cloud their remembering and put their identities to the test. In the 1941 short story, “A Visit of Charity,” 14-year-old Marian pays a visit to what is called an ‘Old Ladies’ Home’ to fulfill her requirements for a Campfire Girl badge. Alone in a room with two elderly women, she is completely out of her element, and becomes somewhat disoriented and totally tongue-tied. “Did you come to be our little girl for a while?” one of the residents asks. And when the other woman asks her, “Who – are - you?” Marian cannot remember. Her story is lost, and so is she. ¹

Every First Sunday of Lent, the lectionary takes us into a wilderness where Jesus faces the possibility of losing himself when he receives a visit that is not in the least way charitable. A devil of a questioner confronts him with a basic challenge: “Who – are - you?” No matter that in the preceding chapter Luke has told us that Jesus was baptized and was then identified by a heavenly voice as God’s Son, the Beloved. No matter that Luke has just traced the genealogy of Jesus back through David, Abraham, Noah, all the way back to Adam – a list of his forebears who were in covenant relationship with God.

Yet, there were other voices vying to shape Jesus’ identity, including those anticipating the coming of the Messiah. He goes into the wilderness where he would be challenged about the baptismal identity given to him by God. “If you are the Son of God,” then live out your identity this way. The first option given was, “Command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Luke tells us that Jesus had been fasting for a long time and he was famished, but still he found the strength to turn to scripture in reply saying, “One does not live by bread alone.”

There were these expectations about what the coming Messiah would do, one being that the Messiah would provide for people's unmet needs in extraordinary ways. Turning stones into loaves of bread would qualify as extraordinary. We see throughout Jesus' ministry that he does seek to meet the physical needs for well-being that different people or groups have. But he recognizes that physical needs are not the only needs. Although his growling stomach tells him to do otherwise, he chooses not to pursue his own needs without consideration for God's greater purposes. We might note that later when Jesus feeds the five thousand, he does so not by turning stones into loaves of bread, but by partnering with his followers to share and distribute what food they had, that by God's grace, turned out to be more than enough.

Another devil of an idea comes to Jesus enticing him that he could have all the power in the world if he would just give up his allegiance to God. It was a common Hebrew belief that the Messiah would overthrow all the oppressive kingdoms. The thought of having all that authority and power just given to him would have been much less arduous for Jesus. But we begin to sense that he wants to take the more difficult route because that would secure for others the option of having a good and loving God reign over their hearts. For humanity to have gained political freedom while losing the privilege of worshiping the One who loves us best even when we're far from our best, would not be the kind of freedom that ultimately fulfills. Jesus, in resistance, once again turns to scripture, reminding himself and his challenger of the central purpose to worship and serve the Lord alone. That would be the route he would take.

Then one more time comes a devil of a thought that once again is based in questioning his identity as God's son. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple so that God will be forced to send angels to catch you. The devil is depicted as quoting from one of the psalms giving indication that just because someone can pluck a scriptural quote out of context doesn't mean they are seeking God's good will for all. The idea behind the inducement was that such an event would be such a spectacle that all the people would then flock to follow him. But Jesus knew that trying to force God's hand got things exactly backwards. Even if he did win people over by spectacle, then they

would follow him only in anticipation of the next wondrous display, instead of following him in order to grow in greater love with God and neighbor. He concluded the encounter, telling his tempter and himself not to put God to the test.

I dare say we all will encounter some kind of wilderness at some point in our lives. It may not be a dry and deserted place for you, but a literal or a spiritual place where you will have to figure out to whom you belong and what to put first in your life. Such challenges may arise when you have suffered a great disappointment or loss. It may be a place where for some reason you feel godforsaken. It may actually be a place where everything you touch has been successful and you don't know what to do with that.

When Moses had led the Hebrew people to the verge of entering the Promised Land, he was concerned that when they finally would have their place to live and were raising abundant food for themselves, that in that success, they would forget the God who had freed them, the God who had led them to their good land, the God who had stuck with them through thick and thin, providing for their every need. Moses knew such a loss of identity would be an even worse kind of wilderness than the desert they had been in for forty years. So, he urged them to remember who they were as God's people and to show that by giving, not their leftovers, but their first fruits unto God. This would help them remember who they were, whose they were, along with providing a keen sense of purpose.

We have entered the season of Lent. We go through these forty days as did our Lord. We journey with the Spirit in us, as Jesus did. Some of us during this season will face questions and temptations that would challenge our identity and sense of call, perhaps echoing the expectations of those around us, as was the case for Jesus. How do we live out our identity and mission as children of God in this day and age?

It is the same question for us as a community of God's people. Will we be faithful to our Godly mission, our call, or will we allow others to define us? We often settle for going after the tempting type of security whose effects last about as long as the effects of a meal. We yearn to grab power and control instead of resting in the power of God's love. We dream about recognition, if not outright fame, when we

could be living out our true purpose in life. As we are confronted with these kinds of tempting choices, we urgently need to cling to our God-given identities, to listen to God's calling for our lives, to find ourselves a part of the larger stories of faith, as we are accompanied and led by the Spirit of God.

When we discover and rediscover who we are and whose we are, we are less likely to get lost when our identity is challenged. God offers us accompaniment and strength during any time we find ourselves in a wilderness, and God will show us a faithful way out of such a place of challenge. Some with wildly varying expectations and urgings will press us as to who we are. Who are we? We are beloved children of God. We are part of the church of Jesus Christ, and all the stories and challenges that tell us otherwise can, by God's grace, be left behind. There is no place or person that is in fact godforsaken. This season of Lent will be different things to various ones of us. If some of us find a particular challenge to our identity during this Lenten season, it will be good to remember that at season's end, there is something about a resurrection. Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://literaryfictions.com/fiction-1/a-visit-of-charity/>