

Anyone Can Quote Scripture

Recently I have noticed a tendency that folks from all persuasions have when trying to win an argument. They will quote others as the reason for the correctness of their stance —and quite often to my amazement and amusement the quotes they use are either totally out of context or mangled in some way. Many of our public speakers evidently no longer feel the need to fact check what they say. In some cases, they have even managed to get the source or speaker of the quote quite wrong. What amazes me even more, and quite truthfully saddens me, is that often the quotes are from scripture and the audience accepts the quote and does not recognize what the speaker has done. As I contemplated the passage from Luke this week about Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness which itself is full of scriptural quotes, this use of authoritative quotes came to mind. Perhaps this passage also has something to say in the context of the way that we try to find an authoritative source or resource for our actions and quotes which we have taken from powerful figures—especially words from scripture and then often have used or heard them used as the basis for arguments to support or persuade us to support certain causes and/or actions. This is true of our behavior as individuals and as groups, so it seems that we need to think seriously about how we understand the various levels of meanings this passage has for us, and for how both Jesus and the tempter used scripture. For if you listened carefully to the text, not only did Jesus use scripture to answer the temptations placed before him; at least one of those temptations was framed within the words of scripture itself. Our text begins after what must have been a glorious high point for Jesus. He has just come from the experience at the Jordan River where after emerging from the water a dove descended upon him and a voice from heaven proclaimed: This is My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Now, being “full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. This time in the wilderness is described in all three of the synoptic gospels but presented a little differently in each. In each the time spent is forty days; in each of them fasting and temptations occur. In Mark, Jesus endured forty days of unnamed temptations during that time in the wilderness, while in Matthew, the temptations occur only after the forty days of fasting and there are three definitive temptations listed. Luke presents a synthesis of these two narratives if you listen closely. The Lukan temptation narrative begins with 4:1—“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the

wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.” Before we explore the specific temptations and the use of scriptures as guides through them, there is something important here at the very beginning of this text that we often overlook as we study the dominant theme of temptation or look at the theme of the identity of Jesus. Jesus gets into this situation—this place in the wilderness—this place where he encounters temptations--because he is led there by the Spirit. None of the narratives address the why although countless theologians have in the centuries which have followed. The simplest, and yet the most complicated reason is that it is because Jesus was just who he had just been proclaimed to be at the River Jordan—he was God son, and he was a human being and thus was subject to being tempted. Jesus did not seek to avoid this wilderness place—he stayed there fasting and praying for the forty days and enduring unnamed temptations according to the narratives of Mark and Luke. Jesus, because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, trusted and went where he was led. And in Luke, Jesus, like the Israelite people is led in the desert for those forty days. He is not led to a place and left there. In Mark, we are told that during this time in addition to the tempter there were guardian angels present in the wilderness with Jesus. In our passage today, it is after the forty days of fasting when Jesus is famished, that the devil begins a dialogue which questions his identity as God’s Son: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” This first test is phrased as a challenge to Jesus’ identity. “If” you are the Son of God, prove it. But it is also a crafty test. I know some folks who practice fasting during Lent—who only drink water during the day and have one meal a day—I don’t know any who actually fast for forty days. The definition of a temptation is to present an enticement, something attractive or inviting. So in addition to the temptation to prove to the tempter there is no “if” about his identify, the physical hunger would have been a temptation. I know that we often equate temptations with moral issues—and certainly some temptations involve morals—but to someone who had not eaten for a week or two much less forty days—the image of a loaf of bread appearing before them would probably have been extremely appealing---I can imagine my stomach growling at the image—but Jesus responded to the temptation with a quotation from scripture he had learned from his childhood—from Deuteronomy, “It is written, One does not live by bread alone.” There are two other temptations listed in both Matthew and Luke, although the sequence is different. In Luke, the devil’s next appeal is a claim to grant power. “Then the

devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you, I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'" In how many ways do the tempter and powers of this world make promises claiming to be able to grant powers and authority in return for our worship of them? Again from Deuteronomy Jesus answered him, "It is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." And then the final temptation that Luke narrates is that the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. Again the challenge is: prove that you are the Son of God—And the devil even brings in some quotes of his own. Our Psalm of the day, Psalm 91, contains the verses the devil quotes later in Matthew and Luke when trying to tempt Jesus: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so you will not dash your foot against a stone." Jesus again responds from Deuteronomy—"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" This week this passage spoke to me on two levels. It told me to hold close in my heart the teachings I have long known to be the revealed truths about God and God's love for me and the world, to not let others create fear and distrust. It spoke to me about the journey that is life, that there are places which are Spirit filled like the mountain tops and there are places that are wildernesses where temptations and doubts lie in wait. Every Monday morning Jill Duffield writes a column called *Looking into the Lectionary* for the Presbyterian Outlook Magazine. This past Monday she began the column with the headline question and answer from the first Westminster Shorter Catechism: What is the chief end of Man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. She followed this with two comments. Her first comment was recognition that for many years memorizing the shorter catechism was a required aspect of Presbyterian Christian education and faith formation. Secondly, that that tradition has been lost along with the use of memorization as a tool in education in general. When as an intern I was given the assignment of helping teach a confirmation class, I was totally astonished at the biblical illiteracy of those seeking to join the church—but in this age of Smart Phone's and Google, I doubt that rote memorization will make a comeback. And since in this age of information access, we can correctly identify the source and the correct context and content, does it matter if we have these words intimately in our minds and hearts? I would say that it does matter that it does matter that

we know the most fundamental tenets of our faith. It matters a lot because these are the things we hang onto when hell breaks loose and the devil is more than at our doorstep or when we are famished in the wilderness and uncertain if there will ever be manna, or water, or a way out of whatever situation we find ourselves in. These are the things which will remain when all we thought was certain suddenly slips through our fingers like the dust that was placed on our foreheads just a few days ago as we began this journey of Lent. Because, when you come to the last verse of our passage from Luke for today you realize that the journey we are on is not confined to the forty days of Lent, just as Jesus' time of temptation was not really just those forty days in the wilderness. Luke 4: 13—"When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." Our life is a journey as well and much of it seems to be spent in more in wildernesses than on mountain tops, yet we carry with us through God's revealed word the hope and promise which can lead us through all those places. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.