

## The Claiming of Identity

On Wednesday, with many people beginning the season of Lent with the imposition of ashes and at least for the day wearing the sign of the cross on their foreheads, there was a visible symbol of their claiming of Christian identity as their own. We claim our identity in many ways these days, by the clothes we wear which often have mottos or slogans; the cars we drive which life mine have bumper stickers which state some of our beliefs. Of course, on Thursday morning as everyone began a new day—that symbol of identity and the reminder of their own future mortality both disappeared. Most of the conversations we hear about the season of Lent focus around the topic of fasting, and of what someone might be giving up for forty days. Quite often the item mentioned that will be done without for the forty days is more in the way of an item that is not a sacrifice at all, or an indication of remorse but something more in the way of some sort of self-improvement: giving up chocolate for 40 days, a favorite TV program to do some exercise. These might result in lost weight, improved health, better time with family—but the season of Lent is not meant to be about self-improvement in that sense. It is meant to be about spiritual self-improvement—a better understanding of one’s identity in relationship with God. The gospel passages on the first Sunday in Lent do begin speaking of a time in the wilderness—a time of fasting, but the fasting was not the focus of the passage. The central issue of this text is connected to the focus of many gospel accounts—and that issue is the identity of the man whose life is described. Last week’s gospel passage from Matthew was taken from the midpoint of Matthew’s account of Jesus’s life and ministry—just after Jesus began to attempt to acquaint the disciples with the reality of what being God’s anointed truly meant. That passage which related the disciples’ mountaintop experience where they witnessed the revelation of Jesus’ divine nature—the transfiguration—and heard a voice from heaven make two declarations: The first was about Jesus’ identity and next was an injunction for them to listen, to pay attention to him. As we move into our Lenten journey we move back into the earlier passages from the gospel into the events just after that first pronouncement from heaven about Jesus’ identity. That heavenly pronouncement was essentially the same: “This is my son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” This pronouncement comes as Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan. Mark and Luke also describe this event which identifies Jesus, and then go on to describe a time of fasting in the wilderness immediately following it. In each, there are some differences in the details of both events. According to Matthew, at his baptism the Spirit not only descended like a dove but alit upon him as the voice from heaven made the proclamation. That must have been a very high point for the man Jesus—to have heard that declaration. Then what follows must have been disquieting, to follow the Spirit and end up in the wilderness for what happens next. “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Mark describes this “leading a little differently.” According to Mark, after the baptism Jesus’ trip into the wilderness is described with these words “and the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Whether led or driven, what happens next is the same. In each account, Jesus fasts forty days and forty nights. Then temptation comes. Not when he has just entered the wilderness, but after those forty days and nights. Afterwards Matthew reports he was famished. We can easily imagine that. We have trouble fasting for a day, let alone imagining what that kind of fast would be like. And of course, the first temptation presented is the obvious one—something to satisfy that hunger.

The temptation to use the power he has to command the stones there in the wilderness to become loaves of bread. But Jesus answers with the words of the Torah. "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus, we know, does not give into temptation. By using Scripture to the evil one who is also well-versed in scripture he overcomes it. Even famished, after 40 days of fasting, Jesus turns his back on the tempter's wares. This sounds so lovely. Yet doesn't it also sound a little far-fetched in the face of Jesus' and the world's real hunger. Then there is that second test that takes place on the pinnacle of the temple. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Again Jesus combatted the tempter with words from the Torah where it was written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." That is surely sound advice. But how often do we follow it. How often do we truly trust in God's promises to us? How often do we truly take our deepest concerns to the Lord, those worries and fears that we have that form our prayers...and then fail to leave them in God's hands continually worrying about them? The last temptation which forms the three given in this wilderness experience was that where the tempter took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, then asked him to fall down and worship him, promising that all that he saw would then be his. Jesus' response was go away because from the Torah it is written—"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." We know this basic, primary rule of our faith. Idolatry is definitely out. Loyalty to God and God alone is the goal. Yet idols are not just physical things set up in formal places of worship; idols are things which come to have pride of place in the setting of our priorities. Strangely enough—even things which seem to be good can become idols if they are worshiped as the Pharisees found when the Law became their idol instead of the God who had given it to them. When we stand at the beginning of Lent, we are at the beginning of a time that calls for an honest assessment of ourselves and our relationship with our Lord, an evaluation of our discipleship. We can linger for a while in the wilderness with Jesus, watching as he responds to the devil, affirming that God's Word is meant for good, refusing to capitulate to lesser loyalties and enduring real hunger, real depravation, real temptation in order to aid us in our real suffering and our finitude. Jesus in the wilderness truly claimed his identity as God's son. This story of Jesus and Satan in the wilderness allows us to hold nothing back from our confession and lament. Jesus knows our pain and empathizes with our weakness. This wilderness before the ministry scene shows us, his followers, that Jesus will stand and face with us whatever come—our biggest mistakes, our greatest losses, our gravest fears, our most devastating disappointments. After all, he endured the devil and prevailed. The liturgical season of Lent is a time for us to truly come to understand the wonderful gift of confession and repentance as the gift that it is. It is an invitation to lay bare to our Lord all that we most want to hide from God, ourselves and others. Because through Lent we can come to know that Jesus can handle our shame and guilt, our pettiness and anxieties, our dashed dreams and secret fears. Jesus is with us, utterly, completely, and unequivocally in the most terrifying wilderness experiences of our lives. Jesus is with us when we give in to temptation. In fact, Jesus will, deliver us from the evil that he survived and defeated. We can be confident that the grace of God abound for many, for everyone, including me and you. We can know that through Jesus' act of righteousness, we are justified. Therefore, we are free to pour out our hearts and hold nothing back from the One

who defeated the evil one in the wilderness and later evil on the cross. We are free to claim our identity as Christ's own—as the beloved children of God. Thanks be to God.