

If You Are Son of God...
Luke 4:1-13

Still...Spring is coming

For the past week, my mind has been preoccupied with an image. A New York Times reporter interviewed Ukrainian women who volunteered to defend their country. Julia, a teacher and Ukrainian volunteer, holding a rifle said, "I just want to live in our country, and that's all." She couldn't hold back her tears and wept as she waited to be deployed to fight Russian troops. As a teacher, her place shouldn't be at the frontline, and what she held in her hand should not have been a rifle that destroys lives. Her job is to teach kids and nurture the next generation to open up a new future. But the war led a young teacher to carry a rifle. Watching her interview was heartbreaking. Is there any hope remaining in this dark time? Wolf Biermann, a German poet, said, "In this age, anyone who speaks of hope is a liar." As a pastor, my job is to proclaim hope, but in the face of human suffering and evil, I have to hold my tongue. We, Christians, are called to proclaim the good news of God's salvation and hope for the final reconciliation. Can we proclaim hope? Yes! we can! and we should! because "hope is the one thing that can help us get through the darkest of times." Wolf Biermann actually ended his statement this way, "In this age, anyone who speaks of hope is a liar. But one who preaches despair is a son of a gun." (of course, he used a more strong word) I would rather be a good liar than a S.O.B.

There is still hope. We, Christians, proclaim and show that there is still light in the darkest time. Our hope is grounded in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, an everlasting source of hope. Just like a winter storm cannot stop the coming of spring, I believe that we will see the resurrection of Christ and God's peaceable kin-dom fulfilled in our lives. Some said, "Hope is hearing the music of the future. Faith is to dance to it." The season of Lent is the time of hearing the music of God's salvation through Jesus Christ and learning to dance to it. Learning to dance is not always easy, especially, if you have two left feet like me. But don't worry. The Holy Spirit will guide our steps and teach us the dance of life, the dance of salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation and peace. So don't despair but with prayer, let us hear the music of God's shalom and see the movement of the Spirit in us and in the world and continue our Lenten journey of transformation.

The temptation of Jesus

Today is the first Sunday of Lent and Lent always begins with the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. On his Baptism, he was declared as the Son of God by God and Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit led him into the wilderness where he was tempted for forty days by the devil. We don't know how the devil tempted him during the forty days. When the time was almost over, Jesus was hungry because he ate nothing, and the devil attempted to test him one last time. What were the devil's three tests? The first test was asking Jesus to command a stone to become a loaf of bread. The second test was a temptation of power. And the third test was telling Jesus to jump from the top of the temple. We all know this story. While these three questions of the devil seem to be separate tests, all three of them were to test one thing: Jesus' identity and his vocation as the Son of God.

What caught my eyes while reading the passage was the three ‘if(s)’ in the devil’s test. In the first test, the devil said, “IF you are Son of man, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” In the second test, the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said, “I will give their glory and all this authority to you IF you worship me!” In the third test, the devil put Jesus on the top of the temple and said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” It seems that “If” was the devils’ perfect trap against Jesus.

Devils’ Perfect trap, If...

‘If’ is a conditional conjunction. When placed at the beginning of a clause, conjunctions describe the condition that needs to be met for something to happen. The devil challenged Jesus’ identity and vocation as the Son of God. The devil was saying, “if you are the Son of God, prove it!”

I know many of you love fishing. Whenever you catch a big fish, what do you do? You take a picture with it. Why? To prove that you caught one! Right? I have read the “Fisherman’s Serenity Prayer.” I will read it for you now. [PPT]

God grant me the Serenity to accept the size of the fish I catch
The Courage not to fib about it
And the Wisdom to know that no one would believe me anyway.

Unless you have proof, no one would believe you. If you have a picture of your fish, you can prove that you caught a big one. But how can Jesus prove that he is the Son of God?

God declared Jesus as the beloved Son but the devil demanded tangible proof of it. Jesus did not have to do anything to prove his identity or to earn commendation as the Son of God. He was declared to be the one who would bring salvation to his people. This is who he is, Son of God, Savior. But the devil over and over tempts him to display his identity in self-serving ways that would undermine his identity as the Son who relies on the good gifts of the Father. The real trap of the devil was to make Jesus define his own identity for himself, not from the heavenly Father. The devil’s temptation for Jesus is also a temptation for us.

If You Are the Children of God...

We often hear the same voice of the devil saying, “If you are the children of God, you have to do this.” If you are the children of God, you should be respectable and admirable in your words and deeds. If you are the children of God, you must have good family relationships, otherwise, other people may not perceive you as the children of God. If you are the body of Christ, you must be growing in number, vital in ministry, perfect in love and united as one body. The devil’s whisper to our ears sounds right. In fact, we try our best to be good Christians and a good church. However, this is the trap of the devil that tempts Christians to define who we are in term of what we do and how we live.

The other side of the devil’s temptation is that if we are not able to do all these things, the devil says, we may not be the children of God. As we all know, church is sometimes dysfunctional, uncomfortable, and painful. It’s not difficult to find pastors who have failed God, themselves, and their congregations. We fight and hurt each other, sometimes to the point of

parting ways for good. Our United Methodist church is on the verge of division. Christian families can also be dysfunctional and have many issues just like all other families. Are we still the children of God despite all our moral failures, broken relationships and sins? Are we still the body of Christ in spite of the divisiveness within us?

Yes, we are! We are still God's beloved children and the holy body of Christ because God declares us to be God's children. We are God's children not because we are worthy of it or because we are good enough, but because God says so. It's grace and free gift from God, not our achievement. Our life and identity do not reside in ourselves or what we have achieved but in God who said, "you are my beloved children."

Let me show you a sign. [PPT]

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Guess what this symbol means. It means "God is greater than my highs or lows."

Sometimes, we are up and down or moving between sinner and saint, but God is greater than our highs or lows. And that God calls us God's own children. Instead of trying to prove it through our actions, we must start believing and accepting this God-given identity.

Learning to live a life depending on God

Jesus knew that he was dependent on God for his life, glory, and identity. Jesus's complete dependence on God enables him to overcome the devil's temptation for self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement and self-serving religious identity. Lent is a time to break our old habits of sin and learn to live a life depending on God. It's time to learn to walk hand in hand with God. To hold God's hand, we first need to learn to open our hands that hold something other than God.

I remember once I went to a market with my nephew when he was a little kid. As most kids do, he loved sweet things. So I brought him to the market to buy him some candy. He instantly scooped up enough lollipops to fill both his hands. So to be a good uncle, I bought him all lollipops he picked up, although my sister-in-law did not like it. My brother's house was on the second floor so to get back home, we had to go up the stairs. However, my nephew was too young to go up by himself. I told him to hold my hand. He gave me his clutching hand full of lollipops. He wanted to go home but at the same time he certainly didn't want to give up his treasure. Since he was a little kid, I just carried him upstairs. Have you had a similar experience with your children or grandchildren when they were kids?

We are all grown up, but we may still be little children in spirit. We don't want to let go of our lollipops when God says "take my hand." We don't want to lose things we value for the sake of God's kingdom while also wishing to enter the kingdom of God. Spiritual practices of self-abstinence or fasting help us open our hands and let go of our desires. During Lent, please choose one spiritual practice of self-abstinence and stay resilient to it. Lent is a time to let go of what we have hold of and instead, take God's hand. Take God's hand and let God lead our way because our life, our glory and identity is dependent on God rather than ourselves. God will bless your spiritual journey during this time of Lent. Amen.