

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Luke 4:1-13; I Lent (Year C)

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

If the Gospel of Luke were *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and Jesus were Indiana Jones ... kind of a lot, so I will repeat it: if the Gospel of Luke were *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and Jesus were Indiana Jones then this morning's lesson would be that scene near the beginning of the film, after the Paramount Pictures' mountain has dissolved into the stony peak of a South American island as Indy and his band finally reach the cave they have been seeking. Though his guides refuse to continue, Dr. Jones enters the darkness to face a series of tests before he can reach his prize, that golden idol.

While it's difficult for us to remember that time before Indiana Jones became fundamental to our pop-culture lexicon, that opening of the franchise's first film introduces the character. In the way that the narratives of Jesus' birth and adolescence function as "previews" in the Gospel of Luke, in 1983 we likely had *some* sense of Indy's personality based on our experience of Harrison Ford as Han Solo and the *Raiders* movie trailers we'd seen on TV – but we had not seen Indy in action. Once in the cave with him, we finally witness his courage and his cleverness, his sly smile and smarts, his whip (for goodness' sake), and in his exchange with nemesis, we observe both his principles and the threat that those commitments will pose to his more selfish adversaries. The cave serves as a proving ground for the archaeologist, demonstrating to us viewers that he is not any ordinary professor.

Well, "full of the Holy Spirit" immediately following his baptism, Jesus enters the wilderness for forty days of fasting, a preparation for his ministry to follow.² At the end of this experience, the devil three times tempts a weakened, "famished" Jesus:³ tempting him to turn stones into bread;⁴ tempting him to assume power over all the kingdoms of the world;⁵ and tempting him to test God in the sight of his people.⁶ In each temptation, we readers witness Jesus' courage and his cleverness, his scriptural smarts, his faith (for goodness' sake) and in his exchanges with his nemesis, we observe both his principles and the threat that those commitments will pose to his more selfish adversaries. The wilderness serves as a proving ground for the messiah, demonstrating to us readers that he is not any ordinary prophet.

Both characters accurately appraise these thresholds they approach: they understand they must prove themselves. For Dr. Jones, it's especially obvious: there are the booby traps, the prize, and the trophy in a museum. Despite his understandable eagerness after so many years of searching, Indiana knows he must be careful and patient in this last stretch of hallway ... lest he be smushed by that giant boulder.

Likewise, at an elemental level, Jesus clearly knows that the most consequential season of his life has begun with his baptism, and he *seeks* the wilderness proving ground. In this preparatory setting *he has chosen*, he appreciates the necessity of his resisting the devil's offers. Despite his understandable eagerness after so many years of searching for meaning and purpose – do not forget that Jesus has lived a lifetime before this moment; it's early in the Gospel, but it's later in his life – Jesus knows he must be careful and patient in this last stretch of hallway ... lest his ministry end before it begins.

Given that we know Jesus will [rather dramatically] be raised from the dead, we tend to *distance* ourselves from his temptations by making them out to be the business of film-franchise superheroes. However, the devil's three challenges present a continuum of temptation not only for Jesus, but for us all. Thereby, Jesus' endurance does not inform only his identity, but inspires our own action.

Turning to the temptations themselves, on one end of this selfish continuum we face the temptation to *fix* [I'm guessing there are at least a few fixers among us this morning] – not for the well-being of our family or community or world, but to satisfy ourselves. The devil urges Jesus to assume authority for all the kingdoms of the earth: "Nazarene, they can't do it themselves! Look how the struggle: the pathetic fights they choose and their petty infidelities. They need you! Of course you won't be an evil despot like the rulers they have known, you will be a good king! Come, take your throne!"

Then, nearer to our kitchen table ... "No, no, give that to me. Just let me do it! If you can't figure it out for yourself, then sit down, and I'll do it the *right* way.

*It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*⁷

At the other end of that continuum we confront the temptation to *despair*, the devil invites Jesus to declare the world's healing impossible: "All of your people that you can see from here – see how they say their prayers and make their offerings – what difference has their faith made? Has your Father's Kingdom come any closer? Of course not. This world is past the point of being well. Nazarene, save yourself the broken heart. And listen: if your Father has truly entrusted you as Savior, let him save you in the sight of the people, so that they will believe. Only such a dramatic act could motivate their weak spirits."

Back at the kitchen table ... "Why do we even go to church? Jesus didn't save my father from cancer! Jesus didn't protect our marriage from divorce! Jesus didn't save this country from political madness! If God wanted us to keep up all these commitments, wouldn't we have received a sign, some confirmation that any of it matters?"

*It is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test.*⁸

And somewhere between these poles the continuum turns in on itself with the temptation for us to deploy our gifts only for our own benefit; the devil invites Jesus to feed himself: “Why do you think he gave you these miraculous gifts? So you could starve yourself out here in the wilderness? Nazarene, that’s ridiculous! Take these stones and turn them to bread so that you can be strong for the work before you. No one is even here to see, and you likely need the practice wiggling your nose or waving your wand, however it is you call upon these powers.”

And once more at the kitchen table ... “God did not bless me this way so I could struggle! God blessed me so I could enjoy the fruits of my labor and the riches of the world. No one else is looking out for our country, so why should we look out for them? We will show them our strength, and they will cower. Let them fend for themselves; we deserve our luxuries.”

*It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’*⁹

And like that awful Emile Beloq in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.”¹⁰

Jesus’ struggles and sufferings affirm that *our* struggles and sufferings need not stand in judgement of our lives or wellbeing. This world demands so much of us – all of us, not just the superheroes – and by Jesus’ model, when the world turns to selfishness and judgment, we do not overcome those trials by returning aggression for aggression; we do not give cruelty for cruelty. Instead, we hold fast to love (for goodness’ sake). We meet meanness with grace, no matter the threat our generosity will pose to our more selfish neighbors.

And while we know new challenges await us – perhaps even in famished moments or wilderness seasons – we refuse to allow circumstance to decide our worth. We will not grant any situation permission for us to compromise our values. What gifts we have, we will not hoard for our sake only; we will offer for the sake of the world – believing that by such seemingly ordinary labor, God’s most extraordinary hopes will be fulfilled.

Held in common by this promise,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Luke 4:1.

³ Luke 4:2.

⁴ Luke 4:3.

⁵ Luke 4:5-7.

⁶ Luke 4:9.

⁷ Luke 4:8.

⁸ Luke 4:12.

⁹ Luke 4:4.

¹⁰ Luke 4:13.