

Stone to Bread

Luke 4:1-13

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One of Disney World's rivals in Orlando, Florida, is a theme park called "The Holy Land Experience." It features both the great Temple of Jerusalem and the Qumran Caves, which, in the real Israel, are located a long bus ride through the desert from Jerusalem. You can go from the Western Wall of the Temple to the Qumran Caves in about three minutes in the Holy Land Experience. The admission fee is \$35 for adults and \$20 for children, and for that, you get to enjoy all the pleasures of the sacred sites and none of the hassles of actually being there. No need to worry about the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. Everyone gets along quite well at the Holy Land Experience. If you get hungry, you can grab a bite to eat at the Oasis Palms Cafe, where Goliath-burgers sell for \$5.95.

The plaster and plywood park covers fifteen acres of Florida's marshlands and tries to be archeologically faithful, down to camel hoof-prints cast in the sidewalk. People who go love the place. Simulation sells. Simulation offers all the comforts and attractions of the real experience, but none of the dangers. In one of his famous fables, Aesop noted, "Men often applaud imitation and hiss at the real thing."

When it comes to the story of Jesus Christ – his life, his death, his resurrection – the only way to approach it is to look on it as it really was. If we remove the darkness and danger and leave only the comfort and encouragement, we miss the substance of the story. The husk will be retained, but the actual spiritual meat upon which the survival of life and hope depend is surrendered. I think of what Flannery O'Connor once said about the Lord's Supper: "If it is just a symbol, then to hell with it."

Each year the church does what it can to counter the simulation of Christianity by observing the season of Lent, a period of forty days reminiscent of the forty years the children of Israel spent in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. Lent also commemorates the forty days Jesus spent in the desert between Jericho and the Dead Sea, where he was tested by the devil. There is nothing more authentic and real that can be said about the human existence than that it will inevitably include times of great testing. This may be God's world, but there is another player on the field – the power of evil.

Luke begins the story of Jesus' trial by saying that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where he encountered this other force in the universe. Now, whether you personify that force by the name "Satan" or whether you use the language of "powers and principalities," here is the true story: there is operative in us and among us and beyond us a strong opposition to love, health, wholeness, and peace.²

Think about yourself. Think about all your good intentions to be kinder or more patient or loving to someone in your life who can sometimes be trying. Think of how many times you succeed and how many times you fail in keeping that good thought. Think about how regularly you do things that you ought not to do and never get around to doing the things you know that you should. There is another player on the field of your heart and your best intentions.

Oh, yes indeed, there is another player on the field in the world. Think about the Holy Land and the violence and tragedy that mark Israel/Palestine today. Think about the epidemic of obesity in the U.S., yet millions of people hungry and starving around the world. Think about bitter divisions among families and friends and among nations. There is great evidence that another player is on the field, and it does no good to deny it. My husband is fond of saying, “‘DeNial’ is the longest river in Egypt.” The truth-telling season of Lent will not let us get away with denial.

I read about a company that allows you to erase anything or anyone that you want to from any photograph you might have. The advertisement goes like this: “Do you have a favorite picture...from which you wish someone could be subtracted?” The company will do just that for \$119.00. The price includes the disposal of the negative.³

Luke does not dispose of the negative. He shows us a battle being fought between the forces of God and the dark powers of Satan. I know it has become politically incorrect for us to sing those hymns that stirred our souls in the olden days – “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before. Christ the royal master leads against the foe; forward into battle, see his banners go.” Well, by God, there still *is* a battle going on – of life against death, hope against despair – a battle between God’s way and the world’s way, and it is real. Our character, our values, are constantly being shaped and reshaped by how we respond to the temptations that are daily before us to rise or to sink, to choose God’s way or the world’s way. Wilderness testing.⁴

I would venture to guess that most of you know about this kind of thing, yourself. I do not know the exact nature of the test you have been through or are going through now. Perhaps you are facing or have faced a great moral challenge. Perhaps you are afraid of dying. Perhaps you have been so discouraged and worn out. Whatever the wilderness, I imagine that yours and mine share at least several characteristics. They are very lonely places. They are not places you or I would ever choose to go, and when we find ourselves there, we have a profound sense of having no control.⁵ Anything can happen, any time. Our challenge is not to sink in the face of life’s inevitable trials.

Jesus’ challenge came in the person of the devil himself, who had waited until Jesus was ripe for the picking. He was famished. He could have eaten a month’s worth of manna. He was lonely. Satan came after him at his moment of deepest vulnerability. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus refused to take the bait. He turned to his faith tradition for sustenance. “It is written,” he said, “‘One does not live by bread alone;’ I am going to stand on that and resist you.” The next test was the temptation of influence and power—“All the kingdoms of the world I will deliver up to you, if you will just worship me.” Again Jesus stood firmly on the truth of his faith: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

The final temptation was to do something spectacular and to assume that God would protect him. “Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple. If you are the Son of God, the angels will be there.” But again, Jesus responded with the moral requirement of his faith: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Behind all three of these temptations is the implication that really and truly, God ought to be taking much better care of God’s own son. Jesus ought to have everything he wants, ought he not? He ought not to have to deal with anything he doesn’t want to deal with. Let the others –you and me —wallow around in the human condition,

facing down fear. It turns out, though, that what it actually means for Jesus to be the Son of God is that he intends fully to share our humanity. He chooses not to exercise divine privilege or practice magic. He does not try to be God himself.⁶

Did you notice how much sense the temptations made? What is wrong with getting yourself in a position of power and influence and paying whatever price you have to pay to get there? Think of all the good you can do! And why not call on God for special protection and claim an exemption from the suffering that everyone else has to go through? But Jesus said, “No. I intend to be a child of God and not a rival of God.” The same ought to be true for the rest of us children of God, when we are tempted to claim some sort of gold-medallion status. “I don’t understand why I have to go through all of this – the temptations, the trials – why isn’t life easier for me? Why so many hassles? Why so many challenges day after day?” Essentially, “Why me?”⁷

Any time you hear that voice whispering in your ear, here is a suggestion you may want to remember. You just answer, “You’re wasting your time, Satan. I am a child of God, and that’s who I intend to be for the rest of my life.”

Two things: First, I want you to consider that the wildernesses of your life may be places of the greatest spiritual blessings for you. It is only in the wilderness that you will discover what you actually are made of. You will realize that there are many worse things than not getting all your needs met. Losing your soul, for instance. That is a lot worse than not having your needs met.

Years ago, Paul Tillich wrote *The Courage to Be*. That’s the spiritual gift the wilderness can give you – the courage to be, the courage to say no to those things that will destroy, the courage to go on living as a child of God. We may battle daily, but we never battle alone. We have a proven champion who shows us the way it’s done. The last thing that I would say is that when you are offered bread at the Lord’s table, I hope you will remember that Jesus refused to turn the stone into bread, but instead became bread himself. His body was broken for your sake and for mine: “I am the living bread who comes from heaven. The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh, and if you eat my flesh, you will never be hungry” (John 6:35, 50-51). There you have it—strength for the spiritual battles of life and death. I hope you will remember that Jesus is going to the cross to win victory over the forces of darkness and death—for us and for the sometimes silly, often dangerous world that is our home.

So come, and receive real strength for your trials and real courage for the living of your days. Take all the bread you want. Go ahead. It’s heavenly food. Receive it in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Notes

- 1 Adam Goodheart, “Theme Park on a Hill,” *New York Times Magazine* (February 25, 2001): 13-14.
- 2 Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 55.
- 3 Cullen Murphy, “The Real Thing,” *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1997): 16.
- 4 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), 36.
- 5 Barbara Brown Taylor, “Four Steps in the Wilderness,” *Journal for Preachers*, (Lent 2001): 4.
- 6 Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, 39-40
- 7 Ibid.