

Sermon
Defining Moments
Luke 4.1-13
Cary G. Speaker, DMin

For centuries, and still today in the more orthodox Jewish families, when the children of Israel celebrate Passover, each family gathers in their home around the dinner table. The oldest son has the honor and responsibility to begin the ritual. He asks, “Why do we do this?” The father answers, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” The father continues to tell the ancestral story of the first Passover.

We hear questions about family traditions in our homes, “Why are we Alabama fans?” “Why are we Auburn fans?” “Why are we Presbyterians?”

In my family the answer to that last question came from my mother, “because your Welsh ancestors were members of the Reformed Church and when they immigrated to this country in 1893, they eventually found the Presbyterian Church.” The answer on my father’s side was more complicated. His ancestors were German Catholic immigrants. When my great-grand father opened his watch shop in downtown Birmingham in 1897, he was a member of St. Paul’s Catholic Church. St. Paul’s was organized in 1872. My grandfather, my father’s father, was an altar boy at St. Paul’s when he was 12 years old. As an adult, my grandfather became a Southern Baptist because his wife was a Southern Baptist and therefore, my father grew up a Southern Baptist. When my Mom and Dad were married, my Dad converted.

Sometimes we instill tradition in our children and grandchildren without knowing we are doing it. If given the opportunity, children will ask more family questions. “Why do we have to always tell the truth?” “Well, a long time ago your great-grandfather...” And again, we tell the painful and costly story of grandpa’s honesty. We say, “In our family, we always tell the truth.” We, the tellers of the story, realize that old grandpa set the honesty bar pretty high. Sometimes, like when we are filling out our income tax forms, we secretly wish that old grandpa had not been quite so honest, but there it is, part of our family tradition.

When I was growing up, my question might have been, “Why are we so generous?” You probably expect me to give a theological reason. You are expecting me to say that my Mom and Dad said, “We are generous because of the amazing abundance God showers down on us.” My parents did not speak in theological language. But my Dad did say, “We are generous because it runs in our family.” Then he would tell a story about the other side of his family, the Wood family. Those ancestors settled in Alabama in 1823 and owned a large plot of farm land in the eastern end of Birmingham. When the Woods owned that land, it was known as Jones Valley. It was before there was a Birmingham. My Dad would talk about his great grandfather’s notebook that had the records of loans to people. The notations would read, “Loaned Mr. Smith twenty dollars. Gave twenty acres near the creek to Mr. Jones.” There were never any notations of payment from these loans. This is the same ancestor who gave Howard College the land for the East Lake Campus. Howard College moved to Homewood and soon became Samford University. When I was growing up the answer to, “Why are we generous?” was, because we can be.

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When Jesus was tested in the wilderness, his responses to the devil all came from his tradition. His responses were what he learned in Sunday school, if you will. Jesus knew his story. He understood the power and the comfort that came from having a traditional story to tell. Jesus had a firm foundation.

What was really tested in that wilderness? It is the same thing that is tested again and again in our wilderness. The devil taunted Jesus with, “If you are...” The question we ask ourselves as we enter the wilderness of Lent is, “Who am I?” Do I live out who I am created to be?

Some of you have heard me talk about the influence Murray Bowen’s Family Systems Theory has on me. One of the features of the Bowen Theory is that leaders must define themselves. That is how I want us to go into this season of Lent. Let’s look at the journey of Lent, beginning with the wilderness temptation, as the way Jesus defined himself. One of my colleagues in ministry talked a great deal about the work of defining himself. This particular colleague was able to stay in a particular church for only five years. After being forced to leave, my friend and I spent time analyzing what happened, “What went wrong?” For several years my friend would offer that he had failed to define himself for the congregation. I finally realized that was not the problem. In fact, my friend had done a very good job of defining himself. He had defined himself so clearly that the leadership of the congregation decided they did not like who he was or for what he stood.

It may not happen very often today, but at least occasionally, I am in a theological conversation and there is disagreement. After some amount of debate, the other person will smile and say, “Well, I suppose it does not really matter because we all believe in the same God.” I am not sure of that. When I hear some folks talk about their religious beliefs, I wonder if we know the same God.

Up to this point in the telling of his story, Luke has been rather cagey about disclosing who Jesus is. We have heard that the angels and shepherds sang, “Glory to God in the highest.” But we do not really know anything about Jesus from that. Even after the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism and eventually at the Transfiguration, we are left wondering, “What does it mean that this man is God’s Son?”

The question that Satan poses to Jesus in the wilderness provides Jesus the opportunity to define himself. Satan asks, “If you are who the voice from heaven says you are, that is, ‘the Son of God,’ then turn these stones into bread.” It has the feel of a taunt. Your Daddy miraculously made bread in the wilderness for your wandering ancestors, let’s see you do it. Next Satan says, “If you are the Son of God, use some of your power to do some good by the only way we can recognize power. Use political power.” Then Satan says something that we still wonder about, “I have political clout in this world, and I can give it to anyone I choose. Just worship me and I will make you in charge of the entire Roman Empire.”

Jesus defines himself by saying “no,” and by quoting Holy Scripture. This may not be the image of a savior that we like. What kind of God hangs on a cross quoting scripture? What kind of God gets into theological arguments with Satan instead of destroying Satan? It is the same God

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who says, “You are my children and I am just as pleased with you as I can be.”

Anyone can talk about God. I want you to be able to define which God. Satan is the first perpetrator of identity theft. The temptation is to lay aside the dangerous mission of being the savior of the world in order to do some more agreeable work. Satan tempted Jesus to be the God he is not. Jesus is self-defined. Jesus knows who he is. He is not tempted to be the savior we think we want. Jesus is not tempted to be the God for whom we thought we were waiting. Jesus will be who he is. Jesus is our savior who constantly defeats our expectations for salvation in order to save us on his terms, rather than ours. Our savior is not who or what we expect.

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