

Luke 4:1-13 *A Heritage of Grace*

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1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.' "

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

One of my favorite scenes from the movie "Bull Durham" shows Susan

Sarandon's character saying to Kevin Costner's character, "With my love of four-

legged creatures, in another lifetime I was probably Catherine the Great...or

maybe Francis of Assisi. I'm not sure which one. What do you think?"

To which Costner's character replies, "How come in former lifetimes everyone's somebody famous? I mean, how come nobody says they were Joe Schmo?"

Interestingly, this human tendency to gild our genetic past is not a tendency shared by Deuteronomy. Quite the opposite, in fact. Our passage from Deuteronomy commands that once the people have settled in the promised land and have become prosperous, they are to take their offering to the temple each year, and each year they are to recite the following as they make their offering: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number... When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us... we called out to the Lord... The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... and brought us to this place... flowing with milk and honey."

A Wandering Aramean was my ancestor. A migrant. A nobody. Joe Schmo. God wants to make sure that the people never forget that. It's not because God wants them to feel that they don't count. After all, God thought they were worthwhile enough to throw all of God's power behind them to free them and bring them to the promised land. But that's the point: that they didn't get there on their own. They got there purely by the grace of God. It was God's power, not theirs, that allowed a ragtag bunch of nomads to defeat the mighty Egyptians. This reminder

did two things: it taught the people that God plays by a different set of rules than the rule of “might makes right.” And it steeped the people in compassion for the powerless—because powerlessness was their own heritage. A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.

And now, in Luke, we see Jesus out in the wilderness, like his ancestors before him. In that frightening, untamed space, the devil tries to tempt him to play by the rules of this world, but Jesus won’t be tricked into it. Why? Because he knows who he is. He knows who he is, *personally*—what his role is in God’s plan; and he knows his heritage. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” Jesus would have grown up reciting that line. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and brought us to this place.”

We’ve just read about the temptations that the devil offered—they were really good ones, and designed to appeal specifically to Jesus in his particular situation. You’ll notice that he doesn’t offer riches or unfading good looks or immortality. Instead, he offers bread—an endless supply of it. By this point, Jesus has been fasting for forty days, so he is famished. But Jesus resists the quick-fix that throws

crumbs at the hungry while diminishing their humanity. “No,” he says, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God.”

Next, the devil switches gear. Jesus’ people were suffering under the heel of the Roman occupation, so the devil shows him a way out, offering to give Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world. And why not? Why not use evil to bring about good? Why not use the devil’s power to bring justice to the world? It is precisely that temptation—the temptation to use evil to bring about good—that turns today’s revolutionary into tomorrow’s tyrant, and that leaves so many dead as collateral damage. But Jesus doesn’t take the bait. He says, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve no one else.’”

And so, in his final temptation, the devil changes tactics. Seeing that Jesus keeps quoting scripture, now *he* quotes scripture, using the very psalm we sang today. He takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels to protect you,’ and ‘they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

But it is precisely because Jesus *is* the Son of God that he knows better. He knows that he is the Son of a God who chooses weak, wandering Arameans, not flashy wonder workers. And he knows that the true test of his calling will be to put himself into the hands of the powers of this world, and *not* be rescued—because the God who brought the Israelites out of slavery is a God who uses vulnerability, who uses weakness, to bring freedom.

As we enter this season of Lent, we are reminded that his heritage is our heritage—a heritage of wilderness, a heritage of wandering.

Yesterday, toward the end of the advocacy workshop that he was leading, Jimmie Hawkins asked us to name the one issue that we felt most passionately about. Some of us cheated and named two or three, and the issues ranged from homelessness to immigration rights to gun violence to racial equality to voting rights to healthcare to education to the environment. All of these things are vital to the future of our nation and of the world, so it's important for us each to choose our focus and speak up for all that we're worth—but knowing our own heritage changes the *way* we speak up.

When we stand up for those with no roof over their heads or no rights as citizens; when we work for inclusion for those who are marginalized because of skin color or income level or gender identity; when we fight to ensure that every person, regardless of who they are, has access to decent healthcare and quality education; even when we struggle to protect the most vulnerable systems and species of God's creation; we do so not out of some sort of high-minded charity, but out of gut-level kinship. A wandering Aramean was *our* ancestor; and so, we don't speak up *for* them; we speak up *with* them. They are us. We are them.

Our heritage isn't greatness, and when we're tempted to think it is, we lose our way. Our heritage isn't greatness, our heritage is grace—the grace we have received when we have deserved it the least and needed it the most. May we resist all temptations to forget that.

And, in remembering, may we rely more and more on the God who has never failed us, so that we, ourselves, may never fail the weak and wandering souls who share our same DNA, and the love of the same Lord who took on the powers of evil with nothing but a hollowed-out belly and a determined faith, and yet, with no weapons but these, managed to save us all.