



**A Sermon from Rev. Ashley Pickerel, Associate Pastor  
Davidson United Methodist Church  
February 21, 2010**

**The Sermon Text: Luke 4:1-13**

**Lent: A Choose Your Own Adventure Story**

When I was a kid, around 3rd grade, Choose Your Own Adventure Books were all the rage! Now, I don't know if they still are or not, but they do still make them. I checked one out of the library this week! I find it fascinating how the authors of these books weave the reader forward in the story and then back and then forward again, often leading several possible "adventures" to the same page, and ultimately weaving it all together so that the reader eventually lands at some ending, some conclusion.

The all wise and knowing, Wikipedia, says that there are roughly four kinds of outcomes in these series of books.

- At least one, but often several, endings depicting a highly desired resolution, often involving uncovering a handsome monetary reward.
- Endings that result in the death of the protagonist, companions of the main character or both, or other very negative endings, because of a fatal choice of the reader.
- Other endings that may be either satisfactory (but not the most desired ending) or unsatisfactory (but not totally bad).
- Occasionally a particular set of choices will throw the reader into a loop where they repeatedly reach the same page (often with a reference to the situation being familiar). At this point the reader's only option is to restart the adventure.<sup>1</sup>

I am particularly fascinated by this last outcome. Because, if any of these outcomes comes close to being analogous to the narration of our story, as we find it in scripture, I think it is this last one; of winding up on the same page over and over and over.

Now, all metaphors break down at some point but I want us to think of God's story a little like one of these Choose Your Own Adventure books. From the beginning God gives humanity this thing called free will. In a sense, humans are allowed to choose their own adventure. Because, while God is creator, God is not coercer. God does not force love or relationship.

Those first children of God got to choose their own adventure. Ultimately, they chose to do their own thing rather than God's. They chose to ultimately turn away and hide from God; seeking to secure their own lives by their own means. Unfortunately, this became the default option humanity would

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choose\\_Your\\_Own\\_Adventure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choose_Your_Own_Adventure)



take over and over again. There is something mysterious but powerfully attractive about that adventure; of forgetting about God and doing our own thing.

Sometimes kids offer us the best mirrors of the human condition. Lori Brandt Hale tells a story about her 3 year old son hearing Jesus' temptation in Luke in children's church. And she wasn't too surprised when her son asked her the question, "What do you know about the devil?" Hale starts thinking through her theology classes, all the differing views...Should I start with Augustine? Before finally remembering he's three. So she simply asks him the question in return, "What do you know about the devil?" Well, he began, "the devil talked to Jesus and the devil was mean." Then he dropped his voice to a low whisper and said, "If we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another, and there was candy....the devil would say, 'You should take some!'"

Hale was a bit amazed at her son's ability to recount the story in his own terms, but also a little concerned that he had missed the point of emphasis; that he was too concerned with the tempter and the temptation, when it was Jesus' response she would prefer to highlight. But then, she thinks, "Well, if he's able to understand this much, maybe he does get it." So she asks him, "What would you say to the devil?" Her son's face lit up with a grin and without hesitation he replied, "Oh! I'd say thank you!"

She writes, "It is not surprising a three year old missed the point, but lots of us miss the same point all the time. It is far easier than not for us to say, 'Thank you,' when temptation comes calling."<sup>2</sup>

That's the thing about temptation. It's not always bad. Sometimes, it is the more attractive plot line. Jesus was not tempted to do bad things. Jesus' own temptation is to take what looked like the easier adventure, the quick solution.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus explicitly states he is here to fulfill the vision of the prophet Isaiah, he says "I have come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19, NRSV) Being able to turn stones into bread will surely bring good news to the poor who are struggling to put food on their table. And what better way to release the captives and the oppressed than for Jesus to have, in that instant moment, full control over all the kingdoms of the earth, so that a reign of justice and righteousness could prevail? And what better way to showcase the favor of the Lord, God's presence and power,

---

<sup>2</sup> Lori Brandt Hale, "First Sunday in Lent: Luke 4:1-13" in *Feasting On The Word, Year C, Volume 2*. Ed. by David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster JohnKnox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009. 48



than to have angels bear Jesus up as he jumps from the pinnacle of the temple? These are the ends for which Jesus has come, are they not? This is the ending Jesus has come to fulfill.

If we go back to our metaphor, it is a bit like flipping through the Choose Your Own Adventure book and discovering the ending you want first. Have you ever done that? Flip through the book and find the ending that you wanted and then tried to figure out how best to get there? This is what Jesus is tempted to do. Here's the ending Jesus wants, the ending God wants, and the devil is offering the quickest route there. But, he's offering them through worldly standards not godly ones; tempting Jesus to operate out of a scarcity mindset, rather than in recognition of God's abundance. See the devil is tempting Jesus to make stones something they are not. stones are not bread. They will not fill us up. That is not what they are designed or created to do. What stones are we trying to eat and fill ourselves with? While the devil is offering stones that can't possibly fill us up, God is preparing a banquet feast.<sup>3</sup> [There are tons of references to table, banquets, and food in scripture: Psalm 23:5, The Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22/Luke 14, The Last Supper in all four gospels, the final wedding banquet with the Lamb in Revelation are just a few!]

Every time we celebrate communion, it is an acknowledgment of the feast God prepares for us. And there is plenty of room at the table. There is plenty enough to go around. More importantly, there is more than just bread at this banquet. Our deepest hungers, physically, emotionally, spiritually, are all fed and nourished at the communion banquet. It is more than just bread, it is a feast of God's presence, love, and grace. Jesus is tempted to settle for stones when God is preparing a banquet. What about us? Are we going to settle for the stones, or take the invitation to the banquet feast?

In the second temptation, the question of how we will influence our world comes up. Will it be through a false sense of control? Jesus is tempted to usher in the kingdom of God through a worldly sense of authoritative control. But the truth is, the Kingdom of God was already breaking in. God's Son, God's Word made flesh in Jesus, means the kingdom of God was already loose in the world; already challenging all other notions of power and kingdom.

Sometimes the church seems to think it is suppose to usher in the kingdom of God either through force or control, but the truth of the matter is, the kingdom of God is already among us. Jesus has already come. Instead of force, instead of seeking a false sense of control, we are asked to look for that kingdom in Jesus and we are suppose to look for Jesus in our neighbors. Especially among the

---

<sup>3</sup> There are many, many references to table, banquets, and food in scripture: Psalm 23:5. Matthew 22 and Luke 14 where the kingdom of heaven is compared to a king preparing a wedding banquet. The Last Supper in all four gospels. The final wedding banquet with the Lamb in Revelation are just a few!



least of these. Jesus says, what you do for the least of these, you have done unto me. (Matthew 25:40, NRSV) And there it is! When we love our neighbors as ourselves, there is the kingdom of heaven, there is Jesus among us! No control or force is necessary. Simply worship the Lord your God and serve only him.

Lastly, Jesus is tempted to prove who he is by showcasing himself and putting God to the test. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” God will rescue you. But, Jesus ultimately, turns this temptation down too, because it’s not about Jesus proving himself. It’s not about showing off what God can do, it’s about participating in what God is doing and what God is doing is offering humanity a different direction; a different adventure. See God doesn’t want to see us landing on the same page over and over again.

Barbara Brown Taylor summarizes the three temptations as ones for more food, more power, and more security.<sup>4</sup> These are the temptations humanity falls for over and over again. We settle for stones instead of the banquet. We try to secure power by our own means rather than love our neighbor and witness the power of God in our midst. We try to prove ourselves, prove our God, instead of faithfully and humbly serving God.

In the Choose Your Own Adventure outcome where the reader finds his or herself stuck on the same page, it advises that the reader has only one option: to restart the adventure. The grace we highlight during Lent is that God does give us the chance to restart our faith adventure. God’s grace gives room for us to go a different direction.

The even greater grace is that God’s imagination is even bigger than that! After seeing humanity end up on the same page over and over again, God could have scratched the whole narrative and started completely new. But God chose instead to enter the story! To enter it and blaze a whole new adventure, new option, so we do not have to get stuck on the same page of trying to get more to fill us up, we do not have to strive to gain more power, or more security. Jesus sets the path for a different narrative.

This week, as you practice Lenten disciplines, or simply when you wake up, I want you to think, “Today is a Choose Your Own Adventure day! Am I going to settle for stones or am I going to take

---

<sup>4</sup> “[The Wilderness Exam](http://day1.org/1756-the-wilderness-exam),” the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Day 1*, 2010. Found through textweek.com at <http://day1.org/1756-the-wilderness-exam>.



God's invitation to the feast? Am I going to try to exert power through a false sense of control (whether in my family or at work or in the community) or am I going to love my neighbor and witness God's power in my midst? Am I going to try to secure a name solely for myself or will I be a humble servant in which God, alone, may delight?

Today is a Choose Your Own Adventure Day! What story are we going to live?