

The Commonwealth of Kentucky is well-known for many things, horse racing, bourbon, and of course basketball. Though I did not grow up in Kentucky, I have appreciated that the people here love basketball almost as much as the people back home in Bloomington, Indiana.

As a young child I was indoctrinated by my parents to love the cream and crimson and to watch every game faithfully. Only my parents were such committed fans that they could not stand to listen to the TV commentators discuss the IU basketball game.

So, they would turn on the TV, mute the volume, then turn on the local radio station and allow someone from closer to home to provide the play by play. They needed someone closer to the players on the court, closer to the coaches and the arena to help them know exactly what was going on.

Most of all, they needed someone who had no problem providing the commentary with a side agenda of rooting for IU to win. TV commentators tried to account for fans on both sides, and mom and dad were unashamedly sold out to their team.

Today's Gospel story is much the same. It is as though Luke has taken this opportunity to provide his own play by play of Jesus' life, after all, the story only includes two characters, and neither of them seem to share this experience with the audience looking in.

Luke is unashamedly rooting for Jesus to win. He provides a narrative that feels like the two ends of a basketball court.

“The devil said,”

“Jesus answered,”

“And the devil said,”

“Jesus answered,”

“The devil took him, saying,”

“Jesus answered,”

You can almost see the ball travel up and down the court. Devil. Jesus. Devil. Jesus. And back and forth it goes.

We arrive at this story just after Jesus' baptism and voice from heaven affirmation, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," and a quick account of the genealogy of Jesus that goes all the way back to "Adam, son of God." Luke even helps us orient ourselves around Jesus' age, about 30 years old.

Author Mark McEntire states, "Modern readers are so conditioned to look for and ask for the 'moral of the story' that the idea of carefully reading or hearing a story and letting it work on us, trusting a story to do what it will, is an act of patience often beyond our capability."

May we hear today's story for more than the moral. It is my hope that this text work on us this morning and all week long, even beyond our normal capabilities, for the story is so full of imagination.

It is so full of imagination that after reading it over and over I finally had to decide that beyond whether it could have actually occurred or whether the story is based in history meant much less to me than the words exchanged by Jesus and the Devil.

Ah, the devil. The adversary. Always at work trying to separate God from humanity.

Here Jesus is so shortly removed from the time of his baptism, the time when he surely felt most certain of his identity as God's beloved child, the time when he was pleasing to the Holy One before his ministry had even begun, now facing a clear attempt from the devil to separate him from God.

And just as it is in our lives, the tests that Jesus faced were not a simple choice between good and evil.

The devil did not tempt Jesus to commit a breaking, or a failure to maintain the words given to the Israelite people in the wilderness, the devil tested Jesus on staying faithful to the intent of God's will as Jesus knew it from studying, listening, and learning the Torah all the days of his life.

The devil's tests are not for Jesus to do bad things. Instead, the evil present in this story works through distortions and lies, where the things most wanted are portrayed as needs, falsehoods are painted as the truth, and distrust starts to look like faith.

Though unclear as to whether Jesus knew his unique future role in bringing about salvation, it is clear that Jesus was a faithful follower of what God gave to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy, a way to follow God and to live abundantly.

Can we imagine if this story were altered to have the tests removed? Would we find Jesus, upon completing his 40 day fast in the wilderness sitting back, congratulating himself on his devotion to God, completely full of himself?

How would the omission of these tests alter the course of Jesus' ministry and life?

Later, when Jesus looked out over the crowd of hungry people, would he have fed them bread?

Later, when Jesus found himself in the hands of the powers the kingdom of Rome, would he have submitted himself to crucifixion?

Later, when Jesus endured the suffering of the cross, would he have resisted calling upon the angels to protect him?

Maybe in the midst of these tests Jesus knew he **was** both fully human and fully divine and yet he did not exercise his divinity to overcome them. Maybe instead Jesus was still realizing his special relationship with God and the plan God had for his life.

In fact, maybe the devil's tests spurred Jesus on to fully claim his identity and to use that which he already had as a source for knowing God and for living abundantly...Torah, the Jewish Holy Text.

Jesus responds with words that speak of God's hope and plan for God's people.

Words that all come from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. Words that he had allowed to permeate his very being until when he needed them most, then they were.

“One does not live by bread alone.”

“Worship the LORD your God and serve him only.”

“It is said, ‘Do not put the LORD your God to the test.’”

Just as Jesus responds with words that affirm God's plan for abundant life, so we can respond to every test of this world by following Jesus' example, and by listening and looking for how God can and does continue to speak, even and especially through scripture.

At the mid-point of my time in seminary I knew I had fallen hopelessly in love with the Hebrew Scriptures.

I loved how they depicted God and how they gave me hope for living. It is in the stories of the people of God, recorded in books like Deuteronomy, that I find an honest portrayal of humanity, and the steadfast unconditional love of God.

I can relate to the people wandering in the desert, already forgetting the way God delivered them.

I can relate to the people crying out to God, the God who was spoken of by their grandparents and great grandparents, the God who displayed power through signs and wonders, because I have cried out to God, hoping for God be present in my life.

Jesus was tested in the wilderness when he felt famished.

He was tested in ways much like we are, not with a cut and dry, fact and fiction, right and wrong decision, but tests that push us to know the intent of God for ourselves and for all of humanity.

The devil said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

What would it have meant for Jesus to have meet his physical needs?

What does it mean for us to be famished? To be full?

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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

What would it have meant for Jesus to worship the adversary?

What does it mean for us to worship that which separates us from God?

Saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”

What would it have meant for Jesus to test God?

What does it mean for us when we require of God a sign?

In this season of lent, as in all seasons of life, we will face tests.

Our paths will cross with opportunities to seek out the abundant life Jesus had learned of from his own faith and Holy Scriptures,

Opportunities for us to seek out the same kind of understanding of our own faith, possibly even opening our hearts to what we may have closed the door on in time past.

This Lent, may we commit ourselves to the study of the same scriptures Jesus found as a source for knowing the hope of God.

I want to encourage you to look at each Sunday's readings and the hours spent in study here at St. Matthew's as a time to patiently wait for God to speak into the midst of your life's trials and the trials of those in our community and world.

I want to encourage you to reexamine what place you have given the stories of God in your heart.

This Lent, may we see in Christ not only his divine nature, but his humanness. Like us, he was born. Like many of us, he was baptized, like us, he faced tests, trials, and temptations.

This Lent, may God renew in us the knowledge that in these tests we are never alone.

May God renew in us the desire to respond as Christ did, using our faith, our holy scriptures, and our love of God and all of God's creation as a sure footing to stand on, to respond with, and to follow. Amen.