

“Yes, we want, and we wait.”

First sermon in Lenten “Yes, And...” series: Challenge + Celebration

Yes, life pushes you to your limits...and celebration can come in unexpectedly places.

Luke 4:1-15 (NRSV)

Our Lenten theme is centered on two more spiritual practices in our “Yes, And...” series, *Challenge + Celebration: Yes, life pushes you to your limits...and celebration can come in unexpected places.*

This whole year-long series is inspired by improv comedy and the number one principle in improv comedy is to say “yes” to whatever your partner on stage says or does – accepting that as truth and reality for that moment – and then to add your own “and” onto that “yes” – thus moving the scene forward. There is no script. Just a lot of trust and open-mindedness.

In life, we constantly find ourselves in the middle of situations and events and conversations that we perhaps would not have chosen for ourselves if we were writing our own script. Sometimes what we feel as a *challenge* ends up being something to celebrate, and it’s probably all the sweeter if it took some blood, sweat, and tears to get there! And sometimes when we set out to *celebrate* something

or someone, so many challenges come up in that process that it hardly feels like a festive mood anymore! The idea being, that these experiences – challenge and celebration do not occur in isolation from one another. As much as we try to prepare for them, we can’t always predict them. It’s an ebb and flow between challenge and celebration – always.

Today’s text is bookended by celebration – even though the heart of the text is all about challenge. Right before Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil – he was blessed by the Spirit in the celebration of baptism. As he arose from the Jordan River in the arms of his cousin John the Baptist, a dove descended and he heard the words, “*You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,*” (Luke 3:22). And as we heard at the end of today’s passage, after the time in the wilderness, Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit and he returned to Galilee and as he

taught in the synagogues he was praised by everyone (Luke 4:14-15). Granted, that praise will be short lived once he gets to his home town of Nazareth, but for a brief moment – his talent and gifts for teaching, and we can presume his message, were praised and celebrated.

Our text today is a celebration sandwich, if you will, with a very meaty challenge – or two – or three – in the middle!

Most of us have heard this text before...and it's easy to gloss over it as something that shows us just how strong Jesus is – that he is able to resist temptation – and if our faith is strong enough – then we “should” be able to do the same. But we can “should” ourselves to death and what’s more interesting to me is what we can *see* of ourselves in these three exchanges with Jesus and the devil. Because when we can see ourselves, we can change ourselves – not out of “shoulds” but out of sincerity.

So first things first. Who or what is the devil anyway?

Called *ha satan* in Hebrew and *diabolos* in Greek, this tempter

figure stalks the pages of the Bible, growing in hostility and perceived power over against God. His appearances are infrequent, but memorable. The Hebrew faith attributed both good and evil to God's agency. Think back to passages where we see that God can save the people but God can also smite the enemy! The Satan (the adversary or the accuser) makes cameo appearances as an agent of God in the Old Testament. (And an unsolicited agent at that! God doesn't call upon the devil – he just shows up and then God speaks to him and Satan starts working on God's “behalf.”) His primary role was to uncover the weaknesses of humans who were highly regarded by God, allegedly to preserve God's honor (Job 1:6-12; Zech. 3:1-2).¹

Satan becomes increasingly hostile and harmful in later Jewish views of his identity and role. He interferes with God's relationship to Israel through temptation (1 Chr. 21:1), by accusation before God (Zech. 3:1), and by disrupting the course of events throughout Israel's history.²

Gradually, Satan's identity shifts from divine employee to

¹ Alyce McKenzie, “The Devil's Hindsight: Reflections on Luke 4:1-11, Matthew 1:12-13, Mark 1:12-13,” *Patheos* (Feb. 10, 2013), accessed on March 17, 2019 at

<https://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Devils-Hindsight-Alyce-McKenzie-02-11-2013.html>.

² McKenzie, *ibid*.

God's chief competitor, in part as the result of Persian influence on Judaism. In that belief system, world history was viewed as a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and light and those of evil and darkness, with each represented by various angelic or demonic beings. Satan became the force of evil in the world. I love how one scholar puts it: *"All sorts of existing legends and images about evil stuck to him as if he were a snowball rolling down a hill. So now, Satan is associated with the serpent in the garden of paradise, an ancient dragon, an exalted angel expelled from heaven, and some kind of evil impulse that resides within each of us (Gen. 4:7),"*³ or he's a complete myth or a real person, etc...

Honestly, I'm still trying to work through what the devil is or is not in my own theology – I'd just as soon do away with the devil altogether – but the devil is mentioned in scripture and in the gospels, at that! and Lord knows evil does happen in the world – each and every day – so all of that keeps me searching and praying and trying to figure it out.

In general, I tend to fall somewhere in the middle of all this. If the devil is some kind of force – personified or not – outside of ourselves – then that allows us to point the finger at others and something outside of ourselves when evil occurs – rather than taking responsibility for the role we have in perpetuating systems that persecute ourselves and others. In other words, if the devil is completely external to me, I can say, *"the devil made me do it"* and shirk responsibility. On the other hand, I don't believe we have some kind of permanent devilish impulse living inside of us just waiting to lead us astray, wanting the worst for us. Bad thoughts creep into our heads, but our hearts are always God's I believe...always capable of love.

So for me, the devil is neither outside of me or inside of me. The devil is a way of thinking about evil in the world...a way of giving a name to that which is not what God wants for our world...for us...for any of God's beloved children. No one person is a devil. No one is beyond God's redemption. But what I do know is this: we are all tempted to give up what God has already freely given us

³ McKenzie, *ibid.*

for the allure of what we feel like the world owes us...and that, I think, is the closest thing to the devil. This will make more sense as I go through these three scenarios with Jesus and the devil.

In essence, as they say, “the devil is in the details,” and there aren’t that many details about this figure that we know about...other than in the Gospels, the present time is viewed as a kind of showdown between God’s rule as inaugurated by Jesus and that of Satan. That bigger picture is the context for this temptation scene. And as one commentator put it, in this episode with Jesus “*Satan gets shown up. The Tempter trips up. Lucifer loses out. The Devil gets duped.*”⁴

Enough about the devil, let’s get on to what happens in today’s text. Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit, which important to note. He has just been baptized and he is now away from the cities and towns and the Temple and he is in the wilderness...but he is not away from God. God is in the wilderness with him.

Historically, the wilderness was the place where God met the Jewish people at Sinai after rescuing them from Egypt. In the wilderness God shaped them into God’s covenant people cared for and led by God with cloud and fire...The location of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness reminds us of the narrative of God’s rescue of Israel.⁵

“To follow the Spirit into the wilderness means opening ourselves to life’s challenges; to those difficulties that will leave us either bitter or better. We choose. The story of Jesus in the wilderness is a reminder that all of us, even the greatest among us, can expect to have the authenticity of our callings [and our priorities and our values] tested by adversity.”⁶ It’s gonna happen. That’s life.

In any case, Jesus is in the wilderness desert. He is fasting, eating nothing during this period of 40 days. It’s at the very end of this time when Jesus is the most vulnerable that the devil shows up. Jesus is hungry. And if it were me, I’d be hangry!

⁴ McKenzie, *ibid.*

⁵ Ruth Anne Reese, “Commentary on Luke 4:1-13,” *Working Preacher* (Feb. 14, 2016), accessed on March 17, 2019 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2769.

⁶ Howie Adan, “Adversity and Authenticity,” *Just Off the Map* (Feb. 10, 2016), accessed on March 17, 2019 at <https://howieadan.com/2016/02/10/adversity-and-authenticity/>.

So the devil says to Jesus:
*“Since you’re the Son of God,
you don’t need to be hungry.
Just tell this stone to transform
itself into bread,”* (Luke 4:3).

In my opinion, this is like every commercial or advertisement we’ve ever seen. Take your pick – whether we’re talking jewelry, cars, clothes, or the latest health craze – we are constantly being fed messages that say – *“You don’t need to be hungry; you don’t need to be unhappy; you don’t need to be uncomfortable; you don’t need to be ‘less than’; you don’t need to be an ‘average joe’ (or jane)”* – *“Just buy this sports car...just buy this diamond ring...just buy this outfit...just try this skin care regimen...just take these vitamins...join this organization...vote for this candidate, etc...”*

We are given all these quick fixes on how to satiate the hungers that we have. The only problem is...when we really stop and think about it – we aren’t hungry for these things on our own! The hunger for the biggest diamond, the best sportscar, the cutest outfit, the nicest house, the perfect body...that hunger has been created in us by the commercials themselves and by

the peer pressure of our consumer society that has normalized wealth and extravagance and the material things of life. The problem is – the more we fall into this trap – the more we want and the more we buy, the further away we get from understanding what Jesus says to the devil, *“People need more than bread (or cars or clothes) to live.”*

The material hunger that is created by the ads and commercials for material things is not the abundant life for which Jesus said he came in John 10:10. The abundant life is the one of spiritual abundance – of gratitude for what one has, not fixating on what we don’t have.

To me, this first temptation is one we all face each and every day – and we don’t even realize it’s a temptation because we are so conditioned to want what we don’t have. We’ve stopped asking, *“Do I need this?”* and have replaced it with *“Do I want this?”*

We struggle with knowing the difference between needs and wants. I’m sure Jesus wanted to eat some bread, but not the kind of bread the devil was offering him. He didn’t need that kind of bread. The spiritual life is

not some kind of magic show where God gives us what we want on command. The spiritual life requires us to wait, to discern, to wonder...and in doing so, we learn just how much we need to depend on God for strength and faith, instead of on ourselves.

When everything else is stripped away...what is left is what is essential. The closest most of us get to thinking about this is imagining the five things we'd grab if our house was on fire...but what if this text is inviting us to think about what is essential without an external excuse like a house fire? When you really think about it – what do you *need*? Once you've identified that, ask: what is everything else in your life doing? What purpose is it serving? Is it satiating a real hunger or a fake one?

Now in the second interchange with Jesus and the devil, the devil gives Jesus a vision. One translation says, *"It was as if he traveled around the world in an instant and saw all the kingdoms of the world at once,"* (The Voice). The devil then says, *"All these kingdoms, all their glory, I will give it to you...If you just worship me,*

then everything you see will all be yours!" (Luke 4:6-7).

When I read this, all I can think about is Operation Varsity Blues, which is what the FBI dubbed the college admissions scandal that alleges celebrities and CEOs and other wealthy folks used cheating, bribes, and lies to get their kids into elite colleges. We're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars exchanged for a spot in the freshman class of Yale or UCLA. One of the schemes involved cheating on tests, the other faking talent at sports.⁷ And at the center of it all was a lot of privilege. A sickening amount of privilege really. A privilege that had parents presuming that their children deserved to go to these schools...at all costs.

The truth is these kids didn't need an education to make money – they already had money. So what was driving these parents to such extreme measures? A need to keep up the pretense that their family was special or smart or successful? A fear of their child not getting into a certain school and having to explain that to others...or even worse...to their child who had perhaps

⁷ David Perry, "College cheating scandal is the tip of the iceberg," *CNN* (March 12, 2019), accessed on March 17, 2019 at

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/12/opinions/college-cheating-scandal-privilege-disability-perry/>.

never experienced “a failure” before?

Just as the devil said he would hand the whole world over to Jesus if he just worshipped him...these parents wanted to hand their children the whole world on a silver platter...the only problem was...they had to pay and risk a whole heck of a lot to give them that world. They had to essentially worship the system of college admissions consultant Rick Singer...and all the subsequent systems that were set up to allow such corruption to work in the first place.

What is it about the allure of “having it all” that dazzles us?

Jesus says to the devil, “*The scriptures say ‘worship and serve God and God only – nobody else,’*” (Luke 3:8).

When we worship anything other than God – even something as noble as education – then we create the playing fields that allow things like the Varsity Blues Scandal to exist...and to thrive. When we worship something, we idolize it, and it becomes idealized and prized a something better than everything else.

It may not be a college admissions scandal for us, but there is *something* in our lives for which we have so longed for or lusted after that we have probably thought – what would it take for me to get that? And I’m not even talking about doing anything illegal...I’m just talking about focusing on how we can get more or have more power or more control in a situation – be it professional or personal. And when we are doing that – we are worshipping our status and our possessions and our future potential more than we are our worshiping our God who created us each and every one as beloved...and as “enough.” Think about it – if we’re trying really hard to go after something and using all of our energy on that – we must stop and ask ourselves...is it helping me to love God and to love others better? Because if not – what are we doing? *That* is the greatest commandment – to love God and love others...if we’re scheming about anything...it needs to be one of those two things. That is the measuring stick by which we measure our success.

The third interchange between the devil and Jesus is even more daring. They move from the wilderness to Jerusalem, the

city of David, the center of Jewish power, identity, and worship. At the time of Jesus, the second temple had been renovated and expanded by Herod the Great and was the center of worship and power for the Jewish people.⁸

The devil puts Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple and says, *“Since you’re the Son of God, just jump. Throw yourself into the air. The Hebrew scriptures that you keep quoting say, ‘He will put his heavenly messengers in charge of you, and will keep you safe in every way, ’”* (Luke 4:9-10).

Essentially, the devil is challenging Jesus to prove the power of the God he worships. Because if this God is real, then angels will come save Jesus as he jumps. It’s a test of Jesus’ power disguised as a test of God’s power. And ultimately Jesus passes the test because he chooses not to be the powerful hero in this text...not to go flying off the building in order for God to save him. Jesus says, *“The Hebrew scriptures also say, ‘you will not test the Lord, the True God, ’”* (Luke 3:12).

This one really got to me this week. It’s all I could think about when I heard that the

extreme culture of white supremacy had produced yet another individual who was driven by hate and the illusion of his power and supremacy to massacre innocent people.

Amanda Henderson from the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado said it well,

“Our hearts are again shattered for the lives lost and the families destroyed by violence and hatred.

The act that robbed Christchurch of 50 community members and loved ones, and injured at least 50 others, didn’t come out of nowhere. The violent hatred against Muslims and immigrants that led to the loss of life in New Zealand is the same as the hatred that killed people at a youth camp in Norway in 2011, at a mosque in Quebec City two years ago, and in a synagogue in Pittsburgh just last October [and I would add – at Pulse Night Club in Orlando too]. It’s the same hatred that led white nationalists to march through the streets of Charlottesville shouting ‘Jews will not replace us.’ And it’s the same hatred perpetuated by leaders around the world and in the United States.

⁸ Reese, *ibid.*

*Islamophobia and white supremacy are deadly problems that must be addressed directly. And we must not cast it aside as a Muslim problem or after the attack in Christchurch a New Zealand problem. It is a problem affecting each and every one of us...”*⁹

Such needless hate and violence leads me to cry out to God in anguish and lament and wonder why God allows such evil to persist.

But processing this massacre on Muslims this weekend while processing this text just reminded me that *we* are allowing this to happen, not God. The devil would want us to just sit back and say, well – if these people were people of God, then God would have saved them. But God is not a God of transactions like that. God is a God of creation who created us and gave us power to create or to destruct.

We can’t just jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and expect God to save us because we are people of faith. God will not be tested like that. We are the ones who are being tested. When will we stop pretending

like these massacres are just one-off incidents of terror and hate and instead will we see them for what they are? Acts of white supremacy and racism and Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and xenophobia and homophobia...just to name a few. Phobia is such a powerful word... “fear of...”

But what is our fear? We have a fear of acting out and of speaking out. We are the ones being tested right now. Are we expecting God to just jump in and save us from this violence and hatred or are we willing to accept that we are standing at the pinnacle and we have the responsibility to work for the changes necessary to breed love instead of hate, acceptance instead of terror?

Our language matters. Our actions matter.

My sermon title was “*Yes, we want...and we wait...*” because originally I was going to be talking about the temptations we face that are really about instant gratification versus delayed gratification. And I would still say that is true for a lot of things – we need to become a people of patience and humility...in so many

⁹ Amanda Henderson, Executive Director of the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, in an email blast she sent on March 15, 2019.

ways. In other ways though, “we want...and we wait...” and we perpetuate pain by our waiting (and our silence). Sometimes we need not wait to get what we want...we have to act.

As my pastor and mentor George Mason wrote this weekend,

“...[It is imperative] for the people of Christ's church to condemn this attack in Christchurch roundly, and more than, [to condemn] that the ideology from which it springs...

The easiest thing to do in times like these is to call the attackers nutcases and let the rest of us off the hook. The harder work is to go deep into our own hearts to find those places where we have harbored or nurtured feelings of resentment toward others, where we have thought that our religion or our nationality or our skin color have privileged us in some way that is threatened by other human beings. Moments like these should lead us inward as well as outward. They should drop us to our knees as well as drive us toward the side of our vulnerable neighbor.”

In this case, we should reach out to Muslims in solidarity of grief and sentiment of love. No one anywhere on this globe should have to live in fear because of their religion. And the people of Christ's church must say so clearly and commit ourselves to speaking and acting against all political and cultural attempts to marginalize people on the basis of their faith, ethnicity or citizen status.”¹⁰

We are not to test the one True God, because that God is the one True God of *all* of us. There is no test needed to prove this...God is love. That is a fact. What we prove – each and every day with our words and actions is whether we actually believe that to be true or not...and whether we are proclaiming that truth with our lives.

In these three scenarios, the first temptation was about self-indulgence or prioritizing the physical and material appetites of life. The second temptation was about self-aggrandizement or the desire to gain wealth, possessions, and political control by an idolatrous misuse of power. The third temptation

¹⁰ Facebook post by Rev. George A. Mason after the attack on the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on March 15, 2019.

is about self-serving religious identity, or the desire to gain influence and followers by flashy shows of power.

We must constantly be fighting against all three. Sometimes being patient as God changes our hearts from within, sometimes acting out of impatience when change can wait no longer.

It's tempting to sit back and wait for the world to change. But it's not going to without our own transformation. We are called to love God and to love others.

We know the world we want...what are waiting for?

Amen.