

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20  
Psalm 91:1-2; 9-16  
Luke 4: 1-13

Full of Spirit  
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Mary R. Brownlow

Last week, I was listening to the Diane Rehms Show on public radio in my car. She was interviewing the short story writer George Saunders, asking him questions about his writing, his teaching, and his life. She asked him whether becoming a parent had any effect on his writing. Saunders said yes and described it as “night and day.” He said, that before the births of his children, he did not see the universe as being “morally infused.” He had been brought up in the Catholic Church and was a “pretty good person out of habit,” which might describe many of us. Then, seeing his daughter, he had a revelation: that everyone is (or should be) someone’s beloved kid. Suddenly, morality was everywhere. Even the smallest decision, if it affected another human being, had weight. He said, “The world can be either kind or cruel, and we are the instruments by which that occurs.” When he wrote stories, then, he realized that no event was trivial, if it hurt someone who was loved.

Saunders was talking about writing, but I was captured by his description of awakening to a morally infused universe. Somehow, now, at the beginning of Lent, this seems like a very profound thought.

Too often, when preachers and religious people talk about morality, they focus on a few types of “misbehavior.” The focus is on sex, or chocolate or ways people enjoy themselves. We hear words like “sin” and “temptation” and “immorality.” We start thinking about all the minutiae of rules and laws and commandments, which are almost impossible to follow strictly. But I would like to think that God has a better use for us than policing us. We are called into a richer, fuller life in this morally infused universe. Can our Scriptures help us get there?

The reading from the Book of Deuteronomy is part of an address given by Moses to the gathered Hebrew people near the end of his life. This has been a wilderness time: the people have lived a nomadic existence, far from civilization. It is a formative time, a visionary time. In some ways, you could say that they were waking up to a morally infused universe. Moses has already given the Ten Commandments, along with many other instructions for living in a community faithful to God and to itself. Now he gives a sort of summary of what it means to turn towards God.

Turning towards God means that they are given a world with choices. They can choose life, abundance and blessings. Or they can choose death, adversity and curses. They are moral beings, and moreover, the key to morality is “very near,” as Moses says in the verse before our passage. It is in their mouths and in their hearts. Once they turn towards God, and wake up to the power within them, they have a pathway to the many blessings of life. This is the moment of insight and formation, a visionary moment, something like the moment that George Saunders experienced in holding his child.

Our Gospel passage gives us another wilderness experience. It is often called “Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness,” but it is so much more than that. It is crucial to the development and

formation of Jesus' ministry, and by extension, our lives of ministry. The Gospel writer Luke describes it as movements of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in the story, we had met the Holy Spirit at the moment of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Jesus is filled with divine Spirit and hears himself named as "someone's beloved kid," a child of God. As if to reinforce this, Luke then gives us Jesus' genealogy, tracing him from his (supposed) father Joseph all the way back to the beginning to Adam, also called "the son of God." We often skip over genealogies - they seem so repetitive and boring and unpronounceable. But here is what I take from my reading of that passage this week: this long line of forbears, bracketed by those sons of God, Adam and Jesus, draws the whole human race into the family of God. The Holy Spirit seems to be claiming all of them and all of us as "someone's beloved kid," namely God's.

This Holy Spirit drives Jesus out into a time of vision and discernment. This echoes a common practice in both Christian and non-Christian cultures, usually for young adults: the vision quest. Questions flow through the seeker. What is my path? What is my true name? What is my role in the community? Maybe Jesus is reflecting on how a son of God might live, since it puts him into a particular relationship with all humanity. This questioning can be internal, but it is often "externalized" into interactions with the surrounding natural world. Moses talked to a burning bush; Jesus has conversations with "the devil."

Jesus, empty of food, but filled with the Holy Spirit, hears a voice. It sounds quite similar to the one at his baptism: it uses the same vocabulary. Except for one little word: "If": "If you are the Son of God, then..." This voice both acknowledges and questions the identity of Jesus. And it encourages Jesus to think in terms of a certain kind of power; to use his "belovedness" in a particular way. Why not just take what you need, why go hungry? Why not feast here all by yourself? Why not take control of the kingdoms of the world, since you are so Beloved, and use your power for good? Why not make a big dramatic splash that will convince everyone of your unique abilities? If you are the Son of God, then you can do all this on your own. You are the moral center of the universe.

In this time of vocational discernment, Jesus, empty and hungry, but filled with Spirit, turns to the wilderness traditions of his ancestors in faith. He turns to the book of Deuteronomy: all of his replies to the devil's questions come from that part of the tradition, when the wandering people were tested in **their** identity and purpose. And he shifts each question about power, each question about his identity, back to God. God is the one offering choices of life and blessing. God is the one who feeds us. The kingdoms of this world will be under God's authority. It is God who has infused the universe with a moral compass. Jesus knows this as a beloved child who will use his power only through the belovedness of others.

So, Jesus chooses life. He chooses a relationship with God and with us over any fantasies of perfection and isolation. This will lead him to criticism, disappointment, and condemnation. But it will also lead him (and us) to feed 5000 hungry people instead of dining alone. It will also lead him (and us) to the palaces of kingdoms to confront injustice from "the edge." It will lead him (and us) to dangerous heights, not because it is a place of astounding magical power, but because from the mountaintop he can acknowledge a complete dependence on God.

Jesus chooses life. In that kind of choosing what amazing vistas open up, what possibility, what grace! By including us in the vision of beloved children of God, his power is shared. And his responsibility is shared.

The story of this time in the desert might be a bit misleading if we think that it solved all of Jesus' decision making issues. His temptations continued, as is hinted in the text: "the devil...departed from him until an opportune time." Many opportune times for making hard choices presented themselves, when Jesus had to treat each human encounter as one with "someone's beloved kid" and then take action.

The Jesus we see in this temptation story is not someone shining in glory. He is a 30-year-old working man at a turning point in his life, vulnerable and very human. He is much like you and me. We have had internal conversations – this does not need to be an external tempter or evil spirit speaking and questioning. We doubt ourselves, question our roles and our power, we agonize over choice, we feel dejected, we fight pride. And, as in the story, temptation is not limited to a 40-day period in our lives: we can choose life and love every day.

We trivialize temptation if we think it is about robbing the cookie jar or buying a piece of clothing we don't need. When people give things up for Lent, they tend to think in narrow terms, rather than term of their identity as members of a beloved family. I read of one pastor who plans to give up "trying too hard" for Lent. Another one said that she was giving up "multi-tasking." These tongue-in-cheek remarks begin to come a little closer to a discernment process about our relationships to God and each other.

In Luke's Gospel, we hear the proclamation of the Kingdom of God: a vision a new age of love, peace, justice, equality, abundance, life, and blessings. So in this Gospel, temptation means the lure of embracing the values and power structures of the old age, of old habits, of narrow thinking. It means being willing to settle for the way things are, perhaps to be a "pretty good person, out of habit," as George Saunders was. The problem with this temptation is that following the inner voice of isolation and exclusive power leads another way: to the idolatry of inferior things, to injustice, selfishness and death. When we open our eyes to the belovedness of each person, we are able to reject that seductive voice of temptation, and claim our new identity in companionship with Jesus.

Henri Nouwen once wrote that "one of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leader constantly gave in to the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power," and that "power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life."

In this blessed season of Lent, we are offered new visions of who we are in the universe, of how our small actions bear fruit, of the many ways we can chose life, choose abundance and choose blessing. If that means saying no to your favorite food so that you can say yes by giving to the hungry; if that means offering someone else the power to do good; if that means shunning the spectacular gesture so that you can perform some small hidden act of kindness – then you are on a blessed journey in the footsteps of the Beloved One of God. Amen.