

"Trust"

Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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"Trust me, man."

I don't know about you, but anytime I hear someone saying those words, the hair on the back of my neck goes up. In my experience, if the purveyor of information/advice/wisdom has to exhort the recipient to trust, the trust is not likely earned.

So, trust me, this is a sermon on trust. Although we often think and hear of this encounter with the devil as a story of temptation, it is also a story of trust: Jesus' trust and confidence in God and himself. And it is a story for us, who have had trust betrayed and, God forbid, been betrayers ourselves. A story for us: of who to trust; and when; and how and how much.

Let's spend a few moments walking through these 13 verses, so turn to the Gospel reading.

First, we find (vs. 1) Jesus "full of the Holy Spirit." Why? He's just been baptized in Luke 3:21-22. Yes, there are all those ancestors of Jesus in verses 23-38, Luke's way of keeping the account orderly and the ancestry of Jesus clear. But Jesus' baptism, the new birth, both fills him with God's power and faces temptation to misuse such power.

Second, the tempter is (vs. 2) "the devil." Horns, hooves, pitchfork, red suit? I don't know about any of that. Whatever images, art or opinions you bring to what "the devil" is, hear what the Bible says "the devil" is. In the Greek it is *diabolos*, (the same root as "diabolical"), a *traducer*, one who is a false accuser or a slanderer. (1) This is not just facing temptation but rather facing one who assaults Jesus' very identity.

(1) Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible; Madison, NJ, 1890, page 22 of the Greek dictionary.

Third, the temptations (vss. 3, 6 and 9) are not exhaustive of all temptations we face, but unique to Jesus. Two of the three make explicit why: "*If you are the Son of God...*" and the third implies it.

This last leads us to the core of trust: who are we and whose are we? Erik Erikson, the great German psychoanalyst of the 20th century, identified trust as fundamental and formative. It wasn't theory for Erikson. A tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed Jew, he was rejected at temple for being "Nordic" and at grammar school for being "Jewish." It was compounded by his discovery, when he was older, that his mother's husband was not his father and that he was, in fact, the child of an extra-marital affair.

Ericson said that the first of eight chronological stages leading to maturity was basic trust verses basic mistrust. He defined trust as "an essential truthfulness of others as well as a fundamental sense of one's own trustworthiness." The question borne of this struggle is "Can I trust the world?" Successful negotiation of the struggle forms the virtue of hope. And—parents, breathe deep—the primary guides for a successful negotiation of this struggle are parents! Since this struggle happens in the first two years of life, the parent's attentiveness to basic is essential.

It is easy to identify the characteristics of mistrust: frustration, suspicion, withdrawal and lack of confidence. Still, mistrust is not all bad. Some experience with mistrust allows the infant to gain an understanding of what constitutes dangerous situations later in life.

So back to Jesus: he has successfully negotiated Erikson's Stage 5 questions (Who am I? What can I be?), Stage 6 (Can I love?) and now appears to be wrestling with Stage 7 (Can I make my life count?).

Going to the wilderness for prayer, fasting and purification is the beginning of preparation for ministry, for the calling to which God has called him. Here he wrestles again with trust: trust in himself and trust in God, under the verbal and spiritual assault of the devil, the Accuser, the slanderer.

While Jesus was tempted, as any fully-human person would be, he trusts God and trusts his identity in God. This is his strength facing significant challenges. (Vs. 2b) Got hunger? After 40 days of fasting, you bet!

Yet Jesus recognized this first temptation announced the mode of attack: challenge trust in God and self. The conditional phrase "*If you are the Son of God...*" tells us all we need to know of what follows. The accuser questions birthright and pedigree—Jesus and ours—as children of God and loved with an unrelenting love.

How does Jesus answer? With scripture! He knew the Book! "*One does not live by bread alone.*" (Deut. 8:3) People have asked me why I require memorization of my confirmation students. Because the Book needs to be not only here (point to Bible) but in here (point to heart). Challenges to our trust will come. We need to remember what God has said to us.

Jesus trusts the Word again when the Devil offers him all the kingdoms of the world. Imagine what Jesus could do with "*their glory and all this authority.*" There are two problems. First, the devil is a liar! Verse 6: "*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.*" Liar, liar, pants on fire! He lies in saying that he can give what he does not possess. Only God is sovereign over all the kingdoms of the world.

The second problem is that there is a condition (vs. 7): "*If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.*" Ah, this is the heart of the matter, isn't it? It is not just lying about giving kingdoms of the world. This drug or drink will make you feel better if you worship me. Liar! This money and power and you will feel good about yourself if you worship me. Liar! The right crowd, even if they do the wrong things, will make you great if you worship me. Liar!

Yet Jesus (vs. 8) again trusts God's word: "*Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" (Deut. 6:13) Even more, he trusts **God** as the source of his strength and the only true object of worship and service.

By now the Accuser is wising up to Jesus, so tries some scripture of his own. Challenging Jesus' trust in God and his identity as the Son of God, the Devil quotes (vss. 10-11) from Psalm 91 that we read moments ago:

*"For to his angels He's given a command
to guard you in all of your ways.
Upon their hands they will bear you up,
lest you dash your foot against a stone."*

Psalm 91:11-12, paraphrased by
Michael Joncas in "On Eagle's Wings (1979)

Jesus is undeterred. He knows Whom he trusts and in Whom he believes. The One who is Lord of heaven and earth says (vs. 12) "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*" (Deut. 6:16).

So how do we find such trust in God and ourselves? After all, temptation doesn't leave forever, but only (vs. 13) "until an opportune time." Prayer, certainly. Searching the scriptures, not once but again and again. Knowing, as Jesus did, that the core of our identity is linked to God: that we cannot know who we are and trust who we are without knowing and trusting in God.

I shared this message with my mentor in ministry, the Rev. Dr. Clayton Miller. I knew something was missing and asked him what it was. His answer was "You." He asked, "*What is your struggle and triumph with trust?*" So, without "bleeding on the pulpit," I would say that it was a decade ago that I learned that something in my marriage had gone terribly wrong and, although we tried to sort it out, we finally agreed we could not. I had to face the reality that the marriage we had was not the marriage I thought we had; that the person I thought I knew was not the person I was married to; and that my whole life as I understood it was crumbling before my eyes. The marriage ended. But ultimately, Erik Erikson had it right: the basic struggle for me was trust vs. mistrust and the basic question was "*Would I decide to trust again?*" Clearly, I did. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. But I have been abundantly blessed more than I ever could imagine.

The other way to find trust is through life in the community of faith. Sure, the church is imperfect. I once heard an ad for a church that was comprised of reasons people don't connect to a church and a response. One of the reasons was "The church is filled with hypocrites" and the reply was "Right: and there's always room for one more." Yes, the church is flawed and imperfect. Yet it is also a place where we share our stories and journey together in trust with one another. It is a place where our children are nurtured in the faith and where young people (and people not so young) test it. It is a place where we learn, and re-learn, as we sang in our opening hymn, that *"the Spirit and the gifts are ours, thru him who with us sideth."* We would do well, as we begin the Lenten journey, to ask ourselves, *"Do we trust one another in this congregation? If not, what do we need to do to restore and reestablish trust? If so, how do we build on it to be bolder in our witness?"*

The good news is that Jesus left this challenge stronger, filled with the Holy Spirit, to launch his ministry. So can we. Thanks be to God!