

A few days ago, we gathered and placed ashes on our heads to remind us of who we are. We are dust, bodies composed of elements that after a few short years return to the universe as random atoms and molecules. None of us have any power to change that truth. Lent is a time to remember...*we are dust and to dust we shall return.*

And yet... if that is ALL that there is, it's a pretty sad existence. The fact that we can even make this judgment is evidence of human uniqueness. We are more than dust. We are a network of relationships. We make histories that exist beyond our own. We have power to make or break someone else's day! Our actions, for better or worse, reverberate throughout time and influence unknown others. To put it another way – **what we do matters!**

Now it is at this point when most people point to the temptation story of Jesus, a story that is read from either Matthew, Mark or Luke the first Sunday in Lent every year, and say, "Look at what Jesus does! Jesus resists the temptation to act in the wrong way. Jesus doesn't listen to the voice of the deceiver. We should act like Jesus. We CAN act like Jesus if we want to, if we *choose to.*" And then what follows is usually some sort of pleading (or threatening) to resist temptations and start doing right things.

And that's where all the problems start. We have been gifted with this amazing capacity, this power, to leave an imprint beyond our own dusty significance **but we inevitably screw it up!** We do the wrong things, sometimes intentionally but more often not even realizing how badly we have messed up. Good intentions often backfire and pave a road to a lifeless hell for us or for someone else. This is a terrible predicament. No matter how good of an example we have, not even an example as good as Jesus, **we need something much more powerful to change** the dirty reality we find ourselves in.

Lent is a time to get back to the basics of faith and the most basic, and important, aspect of Christian faith is the **identity of Jesus**. Jesus is at once **just like us, a human being** who can sympathize with our weaknesses and who in every respect has been tested as we are. Yet Jesus is **at the same time unlike us for he is without sin**. The temptation account in Luke is not simply a good example for the rest of us to follow. It is a powerful testing of Jesus' baptismal identity. A voice from heaven has declared, "You are my Son, the beloved" and Luke lists a genealogy for Jesus that traces his lineage all the way back to God. In Olympic terms, Luke has set Jesus at the top of the podium as the unique Son of God.

Now, fresh off that kind of gold medal experience, Jesus is immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days. Like the 40-year wilderness experience of the Israelites a thousand years earlier, it is a time of questioning and testing. The people of Israel repeatedly fail to live up to their calling as the "people of God". **Will Jesus be any different?**

"If you are the Son of God" the adversary begins, "turn this stone into bread". Well that doesn't seem too evil. It's not like Jesus was being tempted to steal bread from someone else. But this is not a test of moral fortitude. This is a test of identity. How will people recognize Jesus as God's son? The deceiver says a display of power for power's sake should be convincing. The response of Jesus, rooted in scripture, is much different. **He is not God's son because of his willingness to use power but because of his willingness to give it up.** The great Christ hymn in Paul's letter to the Philippians says it this way,

Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

So after Jesus passes this first identity test, the deceiver (and I like using terms like 'adversary' and 'deceiver' because that's what the Greek word "Devil" and the Hebrew word "Satan" actually mean.) - the deceiver tries another tactic. He presents Jesus with political control of the world. He offers to hand over his power over kingdoms, nations, and countries in exchange for breaking the first commandment. Now I'll admit, there are days when I wish Jesus had taken the bargain! Imagine how well the world would run right now if Jesus were in charge! **But you have to remember that you can't trust anything a deceiver says.** Perhaps Jesus realized he was being offered ocean front property in Nebraska! The bible is full of stories where God, not the devil, worked through the political powers of the day. No place is void of God's presence. God alone is worthy of worship as the ultimate power in the universe. The deceiver offers a phony deal and Jesus sees right through it.

With that failure, the deceiver finally brings out the big gun. He pulls out the bible. "Look", he says, "it is written right here. If you are the son of God, the angels themselves will be watching out for you. Jump off the temple! You won't even stub your toe. You certainly can't die." **Prove** to everyone you are the real deal." But Jesus understands that God's Word does not work that way. And it should be a stern warning for all of us who wish to take a piece here or there from the bible in an attempt to prove our own point. **God is not subject to our tests of authenticity.** It is the other way around. Paul writes to the Romans that "**God proves his love** for us in that while we were still sinners, **Christ died for us.**"

That's who Jesus is. He is the **Son of God** who reveals **the love of God** for each of one of the little piles of dust here this morning. We are at once nothing and at the same time people of such immense value that God is willing to go to the cross to save us. And it is that love that changes us-and our actions! By our own will, we have no power to simply choose God. But by grace and mercy, God has chosen us! God loves us and dies for us so that we might also be full of the Spirit as Jesus is. It is a transformation that begins now but will not be fulfilled until we pass, like Jesus, from this life to the next. **But we live our dusty lives with hope.** We live confident that in the waters of baptism, God washes away the dust and **gives us new identities** as children of God who are **valued** and **loved** and **precious**. This identity creates in us a new heart and gives us new possibilities of living each and every day. Jesus is far better than a great moral example. He is the Word of God who speaks life into our dying bodies. I'll take that over a gold metal Jesus any day.