

WILDERNESS TIME
(Luke 4:1-13)

We know it's Lent because there's Jesus in the wilderness. I would guess that some of you have a problem with this story right off the bat, because Jesus isn't out there by himself. The devil's there, too. And I'm pretty sure that the idea of a real live flesh and blood devil is hard for some of you to swallow. I know it is for me. Speak of the devil and what comes to mind is a cartoon character in red long-johns with horns and a pointy tail and a pitchfork.

If I think of the devil at all, it's in metaphorical terms – as a personification of evil. But the odd thing about the devil in Luke's story is that he comes across as a friendly sort of guy. Jesus is out there in one of the harshest, most barren landscapes you can imagine, he's hungry – and not just hungry, but famished – and along comes the devil with what seems like a pretty good suggestion: "You've got the power you don't have to starve; just say the word and turn these stones into bread." What's wrong with that? Or when the devil offers Jesus the whole world to rule over, what's wrong with that? Wouldn't the world be a better place if Jesus were in charge? Or why not fling himself off the temple and let a thousand angels rescue him? Wouldn't that impress folks, make his job easier?

We don't have to imagine Jesus sitting on a rock over here and the devil sitting on one over there, arguing back and forth. It's entirely possible that the devil's voice was entirely in Jesus' head, that the temptations were ideas that came to him – ideas that are plausible and attractive, that make a lot of sense, and that are even backed up by scripture.

The devil is an intriguing figure. But this story isn't about the devil. It's about Jesus – and more than that, it's about the kind of God we see in Jesus.

Remember what happened when Jesus was baptized, how that voice from heaven announced, "You are my boy, and I'm just as pleased with you as I can be." Now we're going to find out just exactly what that means. Who Jesus is will be revealed in his temptation. Who Jesus is will be revealed in what he rejects and how he remains faithful to his true identity.

The temptation that really baffles me is the one to take control of the world. Satan offers Jesus a career in government. "If you're the Son of God, how about some political power? That's real power, so why not use it to do some good. I've got all the political clout in the world and I can share it with anyone I choose. Just worship me and I'll turn it all over to you."

This temptation seems so real because so many political leaders are all too ready to make whatever deal with the devil it takes to get power and then hang on to it. I'd probably better not head down that road.

The question remains, though, why wouldn't Jesus want to do some powerful good for our suffering, oppressed world? What does it tell us about Jesus when he turns down an offer like that? And more important, what does it tell us about God?

Robert W. Jenson, a Lutheran theologian, says that it doesn't take much courage to talk about God today, and not much intellect, either. What's harder and more important in our current context, according to Jenson, is to ask, "Which God are you talking about?"

That's a critical question, one that we often gloss over when we try to be polite. I'm reminded of a debate John Howard Yoder once got into with someone at a church meeting. Yoder, who is a Mennonite, had been arguing in favor of pacifism and the other fellow was arguing just-war theory. Finally, to bring it a close, the just-war advocate said, "Well, even if we disagree, at least we're both trying to worship the same God. Right?" Yoder quietly replied, "No, I don't think we are."

After 9/11 there were lots of articles in theological journals asking whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. And quite a few of them, in the interests of peaceful interfaith dialogue, said, "Yes, of course we worship the same God. Muslims call their God *Allah*, but it's the same God that Christians and Jews worship." I tended to agree. After all, if you say we don't worship the same God, what you're really saying is that we worship the true God and you don't – and that seems more than a little presumptuous.

But it's not just Muslims and Christians. Do all Christians actually worship the same God? Was John Howard Yoder on to something?

Let me give an extreme example. Some of you have heard of Fred Phelps. If you don't know the name, Fred Phelps is the founder of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Westboro is an independent Baptist church. It's not affiliated with the American Baptists or the Southern Baptists. I want to be very clear about that because any implication that they are somehow connected would slander those two denominations. Fred Phelps and the Westboro church are notorious for picketing gay-pride gatherings and military funerals. They claim that most natural disasters and terrorist attacks are God's punishment for tolerating homosexuality. The Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center consider Phelps and his followers a hate group. The name of their website probably says everything you need to know about them: Godhatesfags.com.

The God I worship is not the same God that Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church worship. The God I worship isn't a God of hate but a God of love. The God I worship doesn't hate anyone, although I wouldn't object too much if God made an exception for the likes of Fred Phelps.

As I said, that's an extreme example, and it's hard to know where to draw the line. Where does my understanding of God become so different from yours that we have to ask whether we really are worshipping the same God? If you believe, like John Howard Yoder, that God never approves of war, and I believe that God is okay with war under some circumstances, do we worship the same God? Or are they different?

The great danger in all of this, of course, is that the God we worship may simply be a God made in our own image. More than a danger, that may be our greatest temptation as religious people: to reduce God to something our size, to

reduce Jesus to the savior of people who look like us and live like us and think like us.

The first commandment, “I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods besides me,” is the fundamental principle of our faith. There is only one God, whom we are to worship and serve and obey. But we constantly need to ask, “Which God?”

When someone tells me they don't believe in God, that's the first question I ask them: “Which God don't you believe in? Tell me, because there's a good chance I don't believe in that God, either.” Sometimes they say it's a God who lets something like the earthquake in Haiti happen or a God who lets little children suffer from terrible diseases. Or maybe it's a tamer version of Fred Phelps's God, a God of judgment and wrath. That's the God I grew up with and eventually found I couldn't believe in.

I wish there was an easy answer to all this, but there isn't. If there were, the God I believe in wouldn't change so often. The God I believe in today isn't exactly the God I believed in last month, and probably won't be the God I'll believe in next month. Which isn't to say that I flip-flop all over the place, but only that my understanding of God is always evolving. It has to be, because none of us as limited, finite humans can possibly comprehend what Paul calls the “depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are inscrutable (Rom. 11:33).

Our understanding of God is always partial, always incomplete. And the fact that mine differs from yours in some ways isn't all that important. What it does mean, though, is that we need to be humble when it comes to making claims about God, to think it possible that we may be mistaken. It's only when it comes to extremes like that Fred Phelps that we might dare to say with certainty that we worship the true God and you don't.

What we know about God, we know from the life of Jesus, who refused to let the devil steal his identity, who refused to be the savior he was not. Jesus will always refuse to be the savior we think we need. He will always be who he is – the incarnation of a God who defeats our expectations to save us on God's terms rather than ours.