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Genesis 3:1-7; **Luke 4:1-13**

FREEDOM'S PARADOX

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. If you know your Bible well, the words "forty" and "wilderness" might trigger your memory of another biblical story. You may recall the Hebrew people who, having escaped slavery in Egypt, wandered for forty years in the wilderness before settling in the Promised Land. We call that story the Exodus story. That association between Jesus' wilderness experience and the Hebrew people's wilderness experience is not an accident. The writer of this story wants us to make the connection. Let's remember the basic elements of the Exodus story. The Hebrew people were enslaved by the Egyptians when Moses, with God's help, led the people to escape slavery. They fled into the wilderness, which was both a place of freedom, since they were for the first time no longer slaves, but also a place of testing. In fact, a significant part of their testing was how they would use their new-found freedom. What would they do with their freedom? And during those forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people were indeed tested and tempted and sometimes found wanting. They were constantly doubting God's care and provision for them. When God provided a special kind of bread for them in the wilderness, called *manna*, the people tried to hoard it, gathering more than they needed each day with the idea of storing it up. But when they did this, it rotted away. God taught them that hoarding was not acceptable. God would provide them each day what they needed. When Moses was detained too long receiving the 10 Commandments from God, the people got anxious and decided to fashion a golden calf as an idol they could worship in place of God. Moses came back with the 10 Commandments, this holy covenant between God and the people, only to discover the people

cavorting, and running wild, and worshiping idols. These were a contentious forty years between the people, whom God sometimes called a "stiff-necked people," and their God.

Let's compare that wilderness story with the one from today's reading. The writer of Luke's gospel intends for this story about Jesus' forty days in the wilderness to be a stark contrast to the Hebrew people's forty years in the wilderness. Before he enters the wilderness, Jesus also receives a kind of freedom. He is baptized and in that moment while he is standing in the river, God speaks from the heavens and declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Imagine what someone might do with that kind of freedom, that kind of power--God's son, the beloved. Jesus enters the wilderness full of this knowledge. And there he is tempted. And some of these temptations sound a lot like what the Hebrew people experienced. He is tempted to create bread for himself. He is tempted to worship and offer his allegiance to something other than God. He is tempted to doubt God's faithfulness.

The parties in both stories are offered freedom. But how will they use that freedom? In both stories, God makes a claim upon the people and upon Jesus. God claims the Hebrew people as God's children. God claims Jesus as God's beloved son. They are given an identity. And that identity brings with it parameters, limits, boundaries for behavior and conduct. In other words, they are given freedom but freedom with parameters.

We see that same kind of freedom with parameters in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. They are given free reign of the Garden of Eden and can eat from any tree they want except from one particular tree. And well, you know the story. They are tempted to use their freedom to violate that parameter.

But what kind of freedom is it, if it comes with parameters? Isn't that a contradiction? Is limited freedom really free? Our country, being a democracy, has been forced over its history to

wrestle with this question. And in a great many cases, we have determined that freedom only works best when it comes with parameters. We can take the case of free speech, a bedrock belief of a democracy. But we have determined that right of free speech does not include yelling "fire" in a crowded theater just for the fun of it. We have determined that free speech does not include libel or slander, forms of speech designed to defame another. For the freedom to function best, it must accommodate certain parameters or limits. And that is why the internet offers such a great challenge and danger. Because the internet has few parameters. People can say what they want with little oversight or consequences. And with that unrestrained free speech comes dangers. One danger is that people get hurt. In a small Mexican town last year, two men were arrested for violating an open-container law. However, as they sat in the jail cell, someone posted on social media that the men were child kidnappers, tapping into a regional concern that was already making people anxious and afraid in their community. Word spread over the internet and when the men were released a few hours later, a mob of angry people seized them and burned them to death. Unchecked free speech hurts real people. And it also makes a casualty of the truth. Who knows what is really true when any one can say anything, make any kind of claim or statement without verification? How can you have a functioning democracy, a society based on freedom, if no one knows what the truth is? For freedom to exist, it needs parameters.

We can see this in our personal lives. We've all seen unruly, undisciplined children whose parents offer them too much freedom without limits. This kind of freedom fosters chaos and disorder in the behavior and minds of these small children. And we adults are no different. For us to enjoy freedom, we need limits.

And the limits that you and I recognize, the limits that offer us genuine freedom, comes with the identity we have been given, an identity we celebrate each Sunday when we gather. We

are children of God and we are disciples of Christ. That is our identity. That identity was given to us at our baptisms. And it is an identity that frees us. After all, we proclaim that Jesus frees us from sin and death. Through Jesus, God forgives us, freeing us from paralyzing guilt or shame for our past, and opening a way to a new future. Through Jesus, we are freed from anxiety about death, because we believe that God will raise us to new life. Through Jesus we are freed from the enslaving forces of hatred and greed and selfishness, and offered a way of living with others that offers the blessings of community, generosity, compassion. We are freed from self-hatred, knowing God loves us. Our identity as children of God and disciples of Christ, an identity given to us at our baptisms just like Jesus' identity was given to him at his baptism, our identity frees us.

But here's the paradox. At our baptisms we are blessed with freedom and we also forfeit freedom. There is a loss of freedom that comes with our identity. We are not free to hate who have hurt us or wronged us or who hold to beliefs we disagree with because Jesus says "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." We are not free to harbor anger and bitterness and withhold forgiveness because Jesus tells us to forgive 70 times seven. We are not free to ignore the sufferings of other people or the injustices in society because Jesus tells us to "love your neighbor as yourself." We are not free to fill our homes and closets with excessive amounts of material items because Jesus tells us, "do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." We are not free to live frenzied lives of busy-ness in the pursuit of success or money or achievements because God has said, "you shall have no other gods before me."

We are not free to live any old way we want. When confronted with any number of situations in life, when hardships strike, when people anger us, when we disapprove of others, when the catalogs appear in the mailbox or the ads entice us on TV, when irritated or tired, when

anxious about money, when any number of life's circumstances confront us, we will be tempted, as were the Hebrew people in the wilderness, as was Jesus in the wilderness. Here in our own wilderness of life, we will be tempted to succumb to certain behaviors and attitudes and actions, to live out a freedom without limits. But here's what we recall today. Here is what we recall as we enter the season of Lent and commit to a life of walking with Jesus. We've been baptized. We've been given an identity. And that offers us the parameters in which we will live out our freedom. A freedom with limits, for sure. But a freedom through which we discover abundant life.