Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-2
Deuteronomy 26:1-119-16; Romans 10:8b-13

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. This year with Mennonite churches around the country, we're using the theme, "holding on, letting go." Holding on and letting go is a perfect complement to our congregational theme of being emptied and being filled. It's been useful to use this theme as a lens for reading and listening to the Luke lectionary Text, the story of Jesus in the wilderness. Typically this story is referred to as Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, but after living and working with it for a week, a more appropriate title might be, Jesus' initiation into ministry. At any rate, the lectionary takes us back to the beginning of Luke, to chapter 4. Chapter 3 is the story of Jesus' baptism, of Jesus entering the waters of the Jordan and hearing the Voice from heaven, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased." Chapter 4 begins with Jesus, full of the holy Spirit, being led into the wilderness.

The wilderness, sometimes translated or named as desert, is not so much a geographical place as it is a kind space—an uninhabited, lonely space. A space of solitude. An empty or abandoned place. Jesus is led into this space. And, he's Spirit-filled. It may be a space of solitude or lonely, but Eternal Presence is in the wilderness with him. We know this. We remember the children of Israel in the wilderness and remember that God was present with them. We know this. But when we ourselves enter into wilderness spaces, when we enter uninhabited or abandoned spaces, we often forget that the Living God is present even there. But Jesus remembers. Jesus is full of the Spirit. Jesus is holding onto God's presence, even in the wilderness, even in this aloneness.

So Jesus is led into the wilderness, a passive action. Jesus, Spirit-filled, gives himself to being led. And in this wilderness, "for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

For 40 days he was being tested by the devil. Again, a passive action. The testing was being done to him. In this story, the Greek verb is most often translated as *tempt*. But a more complete meaning is that Jesus is being tried, being examined, is being put to the test, a kind of initiation that examines him and prepares him to begin ministry. And it's biblically appropriate that it's the devil who tests him. In Scripture the Hebrew satan and Greek devil play and personify the role of tester and accuser and tempter. In our cultural context, the devil, or satan, has become the enemy of God, an evil entity. So we may be conditioned to read this story as a battle in the wilderness, a fight, a duel between enemies, a battle that ends with a winner and a loser, a struggle between good and evil.

But it isn't that simple. These 40 days in the wilderness can't be reduced to a simple dichotomy of good versus evil, of God versus the devil, of right versus wrong. These 40 days are about Jesus making choices, choices to hold onto God, and let go of his ego; choices to hold onto God as his Source for Sustenance, and let go of dependence on human abilities and needs; choices to hold onto his belovedness and let go of self-doubt and self-criticism. The tests that Jesus faces in the wilderness are tests that we're familiar with. The choices presented to Jesus are choices we too are given. They aren't easy, straightforward moral choices between right and wrong; they are, too often, choices between good... and God.

Consider the first test: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." And Jesus' answer: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Do you notice that Jesus doesn't fall into an argument? The tester's question is, "*if* you are the Son of God." Jesus doesn't defend his relationship with God. He doesn't argue. He doesn't prove the devil wrong. He doesn't engage. There is no indication that Jesus condemns the question

or the questioner. There is no battle here, there is only Jesus choosing God.

This temptation is a universal temptation for human beings. And how many times have I been caught and trapped by the "*if* you are a child of God" question. We spend our energy retreating and escaping, arguing and defending—always and forever expecting and assuming that we are under attack. And in those times the devil is in our heads, turning up the volume as the voices of our insecurities grow louder and louder; as the chatter of self-doubt and self-hatred fill us. In those times we're holding on to self-doubt and insecurity. Holding on to fear. Holding on to a need to defend. We've completely let go of God.

But Jesus will not be distracted; he chooses to hold onto God. He knows he's God's son, that he's God's beloved child. There is no uncertainty, no insecurity, no self-doubt. Jesus is holding on to his belovedness. Jesus is filled with God's Spirit, is filled with the presence and assurance of God's love. His response to the devil reflects his confidence and trust in God. "human beings don't live by bread alone." The Living God offers a satisfaction and quality of life that bread cannot satisfy.

But there's something else about this first test. What's wrong with turning stones into bread? We could end world hunger! And didn't Jesus himself tell the rich man to sell everything and give his money to the poor? Didn't Jesus multiply the loaves and fish to feed hungry people? Didn't Jesus turn water to wine so the wedding guests could feast? Turning stones into bread is not, in itself, an evil or bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing, a reasonable proposal. But Jesus saw the choice that he was offered with clarity, the choice between good and God. Yes, human beings need to eat. But with a heightened clarity that comes from 40 days of fasting, Jesus understands that the question in that moment isn't about turning stones into bread, the test is about our relationship with God. "*If* you are God's child."

There is no doubt and no choice, Jesus is God's beloved child and Jesus is holding on to that relationship. He will always choose that relationship, that Living Bread. Given the choice between satisfying his hunger or other physical comforts, Jesus will always first choose the eternal comfort and sustenance of the relationship between beloved creature and loving Creator.

The second test Jesus faces is another choice. This time, while looking out over earth's empires, the devil proposes, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority." As Jesus is about to begin his ministry, he's considering political power, surely a logical consideration, surely something he's gifted for and more than able to do! Like turning a stone into a loaf of bread, isn't this a good idea? Jesus is the Word of God-made-flesh—he'd make a great davidic king! Imagine the care and compassion he would bring to that role! Imagine his passion for justice and the poor! Surely Jesus had to wrestle with this choice, the pull between his vision for a new earth and his impatience that *all* humanity experience justice and liberation and well-being. Jesus knew he could effect change. He knew he would be good at it. He'd be willing to stand up against power structures. As God's beloved child, how could he lose!?

The temptation to take over the responsibility of governing was surely a strong temptation. It's a powerful temptation for us: we want to take over and be responsible. As human beings we're so able and so capable. We want and demand to see results in the world as we envision them. But Jesus, with hearing that has been sharpened by 40 days of fasting, hears the real choice. If he pursues this logical, rational, reasonable proposal, he will be choosing the values and ideals of empire, choosing the short-term and short-sighted means of human politics. By setting his sights on earthly empires, on material and physical means

and ends, he would be taking his eyes off of the Kingdom of God. Rather than holding on to his allegiance to God and the Kingdom of God, he would have to let go and instead, hold on to glory and authority on earth. With that clarity the choice is easy, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him." Jesus understands clearly that all the good done on earth is of no value if God and the Kingdom of God are not one's primary allegiance. Jesus holds on to worshiping his God.

For the third and last test, the devil puts words from Psalm 91 into Jesus' head, verses we heard read earlier, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it's written, 'God will command His angels concerning you, to protect you;' and, 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

What a great test! What a seductive proposition! Declining the literal proposal seems easy enough, likely not that difficult to say no to jumping off the temple rooftop! But Psalm 91 is filled with images of God as Protector and Shelter and Refuge. The temptation, the seduction is to buy into the notion that God will keep us physically safe and unhurt. *If* you are the son of God, God will keep bad things from happening to you. *If* you are God's beloved child, no earthly evil will touch you. Isn't that the temptation? If you are the son of God, it wouldn't look good for anything bad to happen to you. It would hurt God's reputation, limit God's power, look like God doesn't keep promises.

The promises of Psalm 91 are amazing and comforting promises. In talking with a friend this week who was also preparing to preach, she read that early Christians put the promises from Psalm 91 into their amulets as prayers for God's protection and as claims of their belovedness. They were sustained by these promises. These promises were Living Bread that kept their eyes focused on the Living God, seeing beyond the cross, beyond the tomb,

seeing the Living Christ. These promises are surely bigger than their literal, physical meanings and implications. God's promises are eternal promises. Not bound by earth. Not limited by human intellect and comprehension. They are kingdom of God promises.

Jesus, with his mind clear and sharp from his 40 day fast doesn't give in to this temptation. Jesus chooses a relationship of love and trust with God, rather than a relationship of proving and testing. He chooses a relationship that recognizes God as Creator and himself as creature; that God is Mystery and Jesus is revealed; that God is Other and Jesus is human. Jesus chooses to do what he's been called to do, to do the will of God, not his own will.

The beauty of this story, the Good News in Jesus' wilderness testing is the way in which he responded to temptations and distractions. Rather than engaging and resisting, Jesus instead remained centered in God. Rather than arguing and defending, he held on to his belovedness. Rather than pursuing and insisting on his own expectations and assumptions, he gave himself to his Creator, to his purpose, to his calling. These temptations and tests aren't about doing the right or wrong thing, or choosing good verses evil—they're about keeping our eyes on the Living God. When we are filled with God's spirit, when we are holding on to the Spirit and Breath of God, we too will be able to let go of distractions and temptation, holding on to our trust in God, holding on to our belovedness.