

“That Ain’t Right”
Luke 4:1-13
Sermon, 3/17/2019

Thankfully, as parents of six children, my wife and I had a fairly easy time. The kids, while not perfect, were usually kids any parent would gladly claim. But there were days of exceptions, as any parent knows. Most of them caused by one of our adopted sons, who had many issues, stemming from his early beginnings. He had come to us from an ineffective, abusive home. One day, when he was about 12, I was planning to visit an elderly member of my congregation. My wife asked if he could ride with me and do his homework while he waited for me to make the visit. She simply needed the break. Long story short, we arrived where this woman lived, I parked the car directly outside her house, asked him to do his homework until I was finished visiting. I shut the car off, took the keys with me, and went in to see my member. Possibly five minutes into the visit, I heard (as did the neighbors) a loud noise that sounded as if a car had crashed into a tree or fence. Somehow my son, from the passenger side of the car, had managed to pop the clutch. The rest, as they say, is history. By the time I had hastily left my member’s home, the car had jumped the meridian that separated the Boulevard she lived on, had torn out a row of hedges on the opposite side of the street, and had crashed into a huge tree about half a street down. When I got back to the car, there he was sitting in the passenger seat, surrounded by broken glass, not a cut or a scratch on him. The car, which I had bought about two weeks earlier, was totaled. I was tempted to explode on him. Especially when he opened his mouth and said, with an absolutely straight face, ***I don’t know what happened. I didn’t touch anything.*** Flabbergasted, I said, ***That ain’t right***, which expression I learned as a child growing up in Brooklyn. The rest of that story can remain untold. Suffice it to say, one of my sons never sat in the front of the car again, nor did he ever wreck another car.

That ain’t right! I have no idea when I first heard this expression, nor when I first used it myself. But it fit the occasion more than once since then, and likely will again. Our gospel story this morning would surely have been one of them. I doubt if Jesus even knew the expression, but hopefully there was a similar expression in his day. The story demands such. There are somethings, and some times, in life that simply defy excuses. They are right or wrong. Sometimes the only response is ***That ain’t right.***

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell the story of Jesus being sent into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he is put to the test. In the story, the Devil

is the one administering the test. He posits three scenarios in which Jesus is expected to decide right from wrong.

In the first, Jesus is famished, not having eaten much of anything for forty days. The Devil says to him, ***If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*** God will give what you ask. Just ask and the bread you need will be given you. (If you are questioning the historicity of this event and this probability, think of the millions of hungry people, asking, begging, praying for bread, making requests that are often unanswered.) This story is truer than any historical reality. It is a story, a lesson, of where satisfaction of our human hunger can be found. It is not in material well-being. It is in something far more lasting, far more satisfying. It is in trusting the mystery we call God to provide what we need. It is something far beyond three square meals a day, no matter how important and basic that need is. It speaks to a hunger deep within our hearts and souls that must be filled. ***One does not live by bread alone.*** The lesson is clear. It is one spurned by much of our materialistic culture. The body must be cared for, but so must our hearts and souls, our deepest sense of who we are. We are more than physical. We, deep down, are needing connection with the source of our life itself. We do not live ***by bread alone.***

Jesus is next led to a vision of all the kingdoms of earth and offered authority over them all. The Devil must figure, what more could a person want? It is an offer of power, prestige, and privilege. Jesus can have it all. All that is required is that he let go of the connection with God, the source of his life and meaning. ***If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.*** What else could he want? What else would any of us want? Power, prestige, privilege, are no small things to have. But hear Jesus's response. ***It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*** It is a lesson we have yet to learn. Jesus's priorities have little, if anything, to do with power, prestige, or privilege. They have to do with service, sacrifice, and acknowledging the mystery, which claims every one of us, the mystery which calls us to the same priorities. That is how we worship the Lord our God.

And as if these two are not enough to digest there is a third test, a third lesson, to go. ***...throw yourself down from here...he will command his angels...to protect you.*** To which Jesus quickly responds. ***Do not put the Lord God to the test.*** In other words, mess with God, take foolish chances, flirt with danger, live as if the divine command that we love God and love our neighbor has some escape clauses, and pay the consequences. Continue to value the material more than the spiritual, continue to spend a fortune on weapons and other supposed security devices, more than you do on the ways of peace and neighborliness, and see where it gets you. God is not to be tested.

And here we are at the beginning of the season of Lent, a season of reflection and prayer, a season of intentionally paying more attention to the things of the Spirit than usual, a season that leads to Easter, a period of new life that is offered. But will we get there? The story of the temptations of Jesus serve as a cautionary reminder. New life, throwing off the shackles of death (physically and spiritually), does not just happen. It comes after a season of reclaiming God, or more rightly a period in which God seeks to reclaim us. I began this past Wednesday to work my way through Walter Brueggemann's devotions for Lent, which he aptly titles, **A Way Other Than Our Own**.

It reminds me that one of the hardest lesson my son had to learn was that his way of dealing with his life was not working. It is a lesson we, you and I, do well to relearn. When life, at any level, is not going as we would want, when we feel a hunger for something deeper and more satisfying, perhaps God, the mystery and sustainer of life, is telling us about our own approach to life, ***That ain't right***.

Excluding whole groups from the fullness of life, for whatever reason - ***That ain't right***.

Seeking to be in control of our lives, driving from the wrong side of the car, as it were, forgetting who holds the keys - ***That ain't right***.

Continuing to seek peace through weapons of coercion, assuming God is on our side - ***That ain't right***.

Living as if those who disagree with us are wrong, because we know better - ***That ain't right***.

All of which is to invite you and me to take a closer look during these following weeks of Lent and seek to identify the things we say and do to which God might just be saying to us - ***That ain't right***.

May you and I spend much of this season opening ourselves anew to the divine mystery in our midst and allowing that mystery to lead us, as the Psalmist says, ***on paths of righteousness***, or as a contemporary translation puts it, ***on right paths***.

I remember when I was a teenager in college hearing a preacher asking ***are you right with God?*** As a teenager, on my own for the first time, I remember wondering what in the world he meant. Of course I was right with God. There have been many

times of wilderness and testing, as there are for all people, since then, all of which have taught me, and continue to teach me about the arrogance of not listening to a God who tells me more times than I would like, *That ain't right*.

May you and I learn to listen and allow ourselves to be led on a *right path*.