

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Kirby Lawrence Hill
February 14, 2016
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13
FIRST

In just over a month, the movie “Superman vs. Batman,” will be in the theaters. In fact, it will be released on Good Friday. However, I doubt seriously that the marketing people who made the decision about when the movie would hit the theaters had any religious observance in mind when they assigned a date to it. Here is the plot synopsis for the movie I was able to find: “Fearing the actions of a god-like super hero left unchecked, Gotham City’s own formidable, forceful vigilante takes on Metropolis’s most revered, modern-day savior, while the world wrestles with what sort of hero it really needs. And with Batman and Superman at war with one another, a new threat quickly arises, putting mankind in greater danger than it’s ever known before.”¹ I’m not urging you to go see the movie. I’ve seen the trailer and can’t tell whether it is going to be any good or not. It does seem, however, that every superhero movie not only has a contest with some ill-meaning villain, but also some kind of challenge where the superhero or heroes have to address questions about how to live out their identity and purpose, with humanity’s demise hanging in the balance.

Identity, purpose – Jesus had been told after his baptism in God’s own voice that he was God’s beloved son. But that was not the only voice he was hearing. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit dwelt fully within Jesus’ life, and it was the Spirit who led him into the wilderness where none other than the devil would challenge him. Two of the three temptations start off with the devil questioning the baptismal identity given to Jesus by God. “If you are the Son of God,” then live out your identity this way. The first option given was, “Command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Luke tells us that Jesus had been fasting for a long time and he was famished, but still he found the strength to turn to scripture in reply saying, “One does not live by bread alone.”

There were these expectations about what the coming Messiah would do, one being that the Messiah would provide for people’s unmet needs in extraordinary ways. Turning stones into loaves of bread would qualify as extraordinary. We see throughout Jesus’ ministry that he does seek to meet the physical needs for well-being that different people or groups have. But he recognizes that physical needs are not the only needs. Neither would he be guided in being the kind of Messiah he would be by focusing first upon meeting his own needs without consideration for God’s greater purposes. We might note that later when Jesus feeds the five thousand, he does so not by turning stones into loaves of bread, but by partnering with his followers to share and distribute what food they had, that then by God’s grace, turned out to be more than enough.

Another devil of an idea comes to Jesus that tells him he could have all the power in the world if he would just give away his allegiance to God. It was a common Hebrew belief that the Messiah would overthrow all the oppressive kingdoms. The thought of having all that authority and power given to him, instead of taking a route of giving of his own life in order to win people the option of having him reign over their hearts, would have been a much easier route for Jesus. But for humanity to gain political freedom while losing the privilege of worshipping the One who loves us best even when we’re far from our best, would not be the kind of freedom that ultimately fulfills. Jesus, once again, turns to scripture, reminding himself and his challenger of the central purpose to worship and serve the Lord alone. A humbler, more difficult way would be what was called for.

Then one more time comes a devil of a thought that once again is based in questioning his identity as God’s son. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple so that God will be forced to send angels to catch you. The devil is depicted as quoting from one of the psalms giving indication that just because someone can pluck a scriptural quote out of context doesn’t mean they are seeking God’s good will for all. The

idea behind the enticement was that such an event would be such a spectacle that all the people would then flock to follow him. But Jesus knew that trying to force God's hand got things exactly backwards. Even if he did win people over by spectacle, then they would follow him only in anticipation of the next wondrous display instead of following him in order to grow in greater love with God and neighbor. He concluded the encounter, telling his tempter and himself not to put God to the test.

We all will encounter a wilderness at some point in our lives. It may not be a dry and deserted place for you, but a place where you have suffered a great loss or disappointment. It may be a place where for some reason you feel godforsaken. It may actually be a place where everything you touch has been successful and you don't know what to do with that. It will be a crossroads in your life when you will have to figure out to whom you belong and what to put first in your life.

When Moses had led the Hebrew people to the verge of entering the Promised Land, he was concerned that when they finally would have their place to live and were raising abundant food for themselves, that they would forget the God who had freed them, the God who had led them to their good land, the God who had stuck with them through thick and thin, providing for their every need. He knew such a loss of identity would be an even worse kind of wilderness than the desert they had been in for forty years. So he urged them to remember who they were as God's people and show that by giving, not their leftovers, but their first fruits unto God. This would help them remember who they were, whose they were, along with a provision of a sense of purpose.

Jesus was offered more bread, more power, more protection. But he was willing to say 'no' to more when it would mean less of a connection to his God-given identity and purpose where he would offer himself for the benefit of all. You and I will get offered various choices along the way. None of us has super powers. Generally, as we make decisions about how to live out our identity and purpose, the demise of humanity does not hang in the balance, but the nature of our understanding of our humanity may, as we relate to God and all that God has made. When we face such challenges in a wilderness or elsewhere, we have to figure out what and who to put first. Sometimes 'more' is not better, unless it is more dedication to love God and all that God loves, which is the primary way to be connected to our identity and purpose.

¹ <http://screencrush.com/official-batman-vs-superman-plot-synopsis/?trackback=tsmclip>