

**Genesis 3:1-13 Elder  
First Sunday in Lent**

**Luke 4:1-13**

**March 10, 2019**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **THE TEMPTATION OF IDENTITY THEFT**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

According to an article published a year ago on marketwatch.com, “identity theft is skyrocketing and getting more sophisticated.” The author, Bob Sullivan, writes, “There were two bits of very bad news for consumers in the recent annual survey of identity-based fraud. First, there were 16.7 million victims in 2017, easily the most all-time, fueled in part by a series of high-profile data breaches. But even worse, criminals are migrating to more sophisticated, multistep frauds, with the rates of new account fraud and noncredit credit card fraud soaring.”<sup>1</sup>

The term “identity theft” is defined as “the deliberate use of someone else’s identity, usually as a method to gain a financial advantage or obtain credit and other benefits in the other person’s name, and perhaps to the other person’s disadvantage or loss.”<sup>2</sup> Although the term itself wasn’t coined until 1964, the danger and practice of “identity theft” has been around for many, many years. For example, fugitives from justice have assumed the identities of dead people, a practice known as “ghosting.” These days we’re more likely to hear about – and be warned about – financial identity theft, with all of its accompanying hassles and headaches and damage to your credit rating.

On this first Sunday of Lent, I suggest that “identity theft” is as old as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and Jesus in the Judean wilderness. Granted, the Old and New Testament stories today don’t have anything to do with social security numbers, driver license numbers, bank account numbers, credit card account numbers, PIN’s, or passwords. On the other hand, the temptation of identity theft in these two biblical stories is more serious at a much more fundamental level than even financial identity theft. As inconvenient as financial identity theft surely is, the identity theft of who we are as God’s children has much more devastating effects.

According to an article about financial identity theft, “the majority of identity theft victims do not realize that they are a victim until it has negatively impacted their lives. . . It is therefore of great importance to watch out for warning signs that your identity has been compromised.”<sup>3</sup> The same reality and warning are relevant to your life and mine this Lenten season.

During the past few months, we have celebrated the Sacrament of Baptism with Royal Pearson Johnson, IV, Ellianna Grace Johnson, Callie Jane Cottle and Cooper Clayton Hall. Whenever we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, we are all asked to remember our baptisms, with all of the promises claimed and responsibilities assumed. When Cooper was baptized a couple of weeks ago, we used a Renewal of Baptismal

Vows for our Prayer of Confession. We reaffirmed our vows to turn away from the powers of sin in the world, to turn again to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and, with God's help, to be Christ's faithful disciples.

You might remember that, before I put the water on a baby's head, I say, "Callie Jane Cottle, for you Jesus came into the world; for you he died and conquered death; all this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet. We love because God first loved us." When I put the water on the child's head, I say, "Cooper Clayton Hall, child of the covenant,

I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." After I put the water on the child's head, I say, "Royal Pearson, Elliana Grace, child of the covenant, in baptism, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as God's own forever, and called to follow Christ in mission. Amen." In the Presbyterian Church, a baptism is not a christening. I am not naming the child. But, baptism has everything to do with our identity as a child of God. As 1 John 3:1 reminds us, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

That identity – "child of God" – is at stake in these two temptation stories from Genesis 3 and Luke 4. Our identity as "children of God" is at stake every day, as we face the persistent temptation to trade our true identity for one that is a poor substitute. Unfortunately, too often we don't realize it until it has negatively impacted our lives.

Know this – it's nothing that God did to or against Adam and Eve. He provided everything they needed in the garden. He created them in his own image. He established a perfect relationship with them. He cared for them in every way possible. In return, he asked them to trust him as their God who knew what was best for them and loved them enough to make sure they got what was best for them. Their identity was firmly established – "children of God."

But, as the story says, "the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made." The serpent didn't tempt Adam and Eve with ugly actions and horrific behaviors that made them cringe. On the contrary, he offered them food that was good, a delight to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise. But, really, the fruit was just the tool used to tempt them to trade their true identities for false identities. The serpent introduced something new into their relationship with God – the element of doubt. The serpent asked the question, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" and implied that God was holding out on Adam and Eve. He doesn't come right out and say it, but the serpent implies that God can't be trusted. And if God can't be trusted, who else can you turn to, Adam and Eve, except yourselves? "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5)

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, the apostle Paul writes about Adam and Jesus Christ, and the significance of their disobedience and obedience for all of human life. Listen to how *The Message* describes our relationship with God: "Here it is in a nutshell! Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out

of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right.” (Romans 5:18-19)

Jesus faced the same temptation in the Judean wilderness that Adam and Eve succumbed to in the Garden of Eden. Jesus’ identity is not an issue. In the story of Jesus’ baptism, we hear the voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22) Luke traces Jesus’ family tree all the way back to “son of Adam, son of God.” (3:38) Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

It’s not that the devil doesn’t know who Jesus is and his true identity as the Son of God. So, don’t be fooled when you hear him say to Jesus, “**If** you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. . . **If** you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” To us English-speakers, the word “if” suggests a question and uncertainty. It’s as if the devil doesn’t know who Jesus is and wants him to prove his identity. But what the devil says to Jesus can be translated, “**Since** you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread . . . throw yourself down from here.”

In other words, Jesus, are you sure you can trust God to be true to his word? Why don’t you use your powers and your status and your identity to take matters into your own hands? Why trust God and wait to see how things are going to turn out? Why not feed the masses with bread, establish your kingdom here on earth, and wow the crowds with an eye-popping display of your power?

The devil doesn’t entice Jesus with particular, individual temptations and behaviors we like to call “sin.” No, the devil aims his temptations at Jesus’ very core identity as a child of God who is asked to put his whole trust in God for all of life, even when that trust leads inevitably to his death on a cross. It’s hardly a coincidence that at the end of his life, Jesus faces the very same temptation as he hangs on the cross, dying for the sins of the world, dying for you and for me. Luke tells us, “the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” (Luke 23:35-37) The irony, of course, is that if Jesus saved himself, he wouldn’t and couldn’t save others. If his true identity as the Son of God had been stolen, we would of all people be the most to be pitied.

It has been said that the story of Jesus’ baptism in Luke 3 answers the question, “Is Jesus God’s Son?” and the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness in Luke 4 answers the question, “What kind of Son will he be?”

The same can be said about our lives. Our baptisms answer the question, “Who are we?” and the answer is a “child of the covenant, sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as God’s own forever, and called to follow Christ in mission.” As we live into our baptism identities, the question becomes, “What kind of child of God will we be?”

You know as well as I that baptism doesn’t surround you with some kind of force field that protects you from the sufferings and challenges and temptations of this world. In fact, your baptism can sometimes lead you to even more suffering and

challenges because of your faith. Sin is pernicious – even when we pursue the greatest ends for the greatest purposes, we can be lured away from putting our trust in God for all of life. It’s a real challenge, isn’t it? When life is going well, we are tempted to think, “I’ve done pretty well on my own.” When life falls apart, we are tempted to think, “Where is God when I need him?”

Let me tell you what I don’t want to do in today’s sermon. I don’t want to tell you, “Just trust God more.” Now, there’s nothing wrong with trusting God more, but to leave it at that will simply frustrate all of us. Nor do I want to give you some kind of list of do’s and don’t’s of the Christian life to follow. I suppose there could be some value in those kinds of lists, but inevitably we end up using those lists to rate ourselves as deserving of God’s love and grace and/or judging other people as falling short of the mark.

Instead, I invite you to think about this story of Jesus in the wilderness. Use these weeks of the Lenten season to remember the kind of life Jesus lived – a life of claiming his true identity as a child of God that led him to serve and love God and his neighbors.

Also, during this Lenten season, I encourage you to reclaim your true identity as a child of God and, with God’s help, seek to live as such a beloved child. As I was preparing this sermon, I found a poem on Jan Richardson’s blog, “Painted Prayer Book.” I like what she has to say: “As we cross with Christ into the landscape of Lent and into the mystery that lies ahead of us, may we know at least this about ourselves: that our name, too, is Beloved.

### Beloved Is Where We Begin

If you would enter  
into the wilderness,  
do not begin  
without a blessing.

Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,  
named by the One  
who has traveled this path  
before you.

Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard

to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.

I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you  
from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger,  
or thirst,  
from the scorching  
of sun  
or the fall  
of the night.

But I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.

I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road  
such as this,  
that fly to meet us  
bearing comfort  
and strength,  
that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:

Beloved.  
Beloved.  
Beloved.<sup>4</sup>

Very early Wednesday morning, I saw this post from Karla on Facebook. It's called "Simple truths to repeat when you're in a spiritual battle." When you're afraid that your identity as a beloved child of God is in danger of being stolen from you, remember:

- God's got this.
- The Lord fights for me.
- Jesus loves me.
- Not today, Satan.
- I am a child of God.
- He is able.
- It is finished.
- His Grace is sufficient.
- Joy comes in the morning.
- I am not alone.
- I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
- Fear has no grip on me.
- Christ is enough for me.
- He has overcome the world.
- I am a new creation in Christ.
- Jesus conquered the grave.
- Sin doesn't define me, Christ does.
- Be still and know
- God is good.

***Let us pray: God, you know our hearts. You have knitted our inmost being and you know our deepest desires, fears and worries. Help us to journey during this Lenten season into a new awareness of your presence in our lives. Save us from our own temptations, so that we may more freely follow you. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bob Sullivan, "Identity theft is skyrocketing, and getting more sophisticated," February 27, 2018 at [www.marketwatch.com](http://www.marketwatch.com).

<sup>2</sup>"Identity theft" at [www.en.m.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org).

<sup>3</sup>ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Jan Richardson, "Beloved is Where We Begin," at [www.paintedprayerbook.com](http://www.paintedprayerbook.com) and [janrichardson.com](http://janrichardson.com).