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Lent 1C
Peace, Seattle
February 14, 2015
Luke 4:1-13

TO BE BELOVED

Yesterday, our family headed to the Tacoma Museum of Glass for a rare treat—the opportunity to see Italian master glass blower Lino Tagliapietro—the Maestro at work.

For three hours we sat, captivated, as he created and executed glass designs with a supporting cast of ten artisans. It was mesmerizing.

Coaxing unique shapes from the glass with the tools of the trade, Lino's team moved around the shop in a choreographed dance—from furnace to table and back again—and at the center of the dance was 81 year old Lino himself, his movements calm and purposeful, his focus complete.

The furnaces in the workshop are kept at between 2100 and 2400 degrees, and one of the more interesting aspects of the teamwork (for me) was how his assistants used wooden paddles to shield Lino's arms or legs from the intense heat coming off the hot glass.

Blowing and pulling the molten glass, testing and shaping it to reflect his artistic sensibilities, and, finally, deciding the piece was done—he made it all look so easy!

In today's gospel we get a glimpse of a different kind of shaping going on. The shaping of Jesus for public ministry; and the location of this workshop is the desert.

For centuries, the desert was the proving place for those whom God called to prophetic ministry. The place where mind and body were stripped down and distractions whittled away; the place where ambitions and appetites were exposed and pretensions dried up; the place where one's mettle was proved…or not.

And so Jesus, fresh from his baptism and from hearing the words: YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON, WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED...is led by the Spirit into the desert proving ground.

Curiously, Luke inserts his genealogy section between Jesus' baptism and this desert experience.

Why here? Perhaps Luke—who traces Jesus' ancestry all the way to ADAM—is saying,
(1) that Jesus is fully human; and (2) what happens in the desert is part of what it means to be human.

To be human is to be tempted. To be human is to hear voices coaxing us to take their point of view—voices that may not have our best interests at heart. To be human is to enter a battleground where the fundamental forces of good and evil pull at us from opposite directions.

Whatever Luke may have had in mind, it's clear that before Jesus begins his public ministry, before he gathers a community around himself, he must show us he's up to the task. Not that Jesus is looking for a fight—it simply comes with the territory.

One thing we ought to know from the get go, is that while Jesus, in going to the desert, is following a pattern long established by prophets of old, he's not just going through the motions here, not just acting out a script.

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This desert experience, his hunger, the Tempter's voice—these are all very real.
So, 40 days and 40 nights without food, and the devil makes his move.

Now Luke and Matthew distill the temptations down to three. But we ought not think that there were only three temptations. Surely there were many more than three over those 40 days!

Yet the essence of all the temptations Jesus endured is summed up in these three:
- The temptation to PUT HIS NEEDS FIRST;
- the temptation to RULE THE WORLD THROUGH POWER;
- the temptation for SELF-PRESERVATION.

In the end, as we see, Jesus passes the test. He proves his mettle; shows he's trustworthy, and trustworthy for one reason—because God is trustworthy.

When God says at his baptism, YOU ARE MY SON—I LOVE YOU!—God affirms Jesus' identity, and gives him ground to stand on—and that grounding makes all the difference.

Knowing that his heavenly Father believes in him, and beloves him gives Jesus a solid place to stand and shields him from the heat when the temptations start to fly.

Jesus will emerge from his desert experience with a fuller vision of the mission he's been called to. Tried by fire, this vision that will undergird everything he does—the people he summons, his method of operation, his teaching and preaching, his going to the cross.

And it all begins with his relationship with God—you are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased!

Recent studies have found that remnants of Neanderthal DNA are still knocking around the homo—sapien gnome. 50,000 years after Neanderthals and Modern humans encountered one another on the plains of Europe, certain traits that passed from one group to the other are still present.

The short list includes: bad skin, proneness to depression, addiction to cigarettes and atherosclerosis.[1] Not the kind of stuff you want in your family tree!

There's an ongoing debate these days about the ultimate role our DNA has in our lives.
Do genetic attributes stack the deck in our favor or against us?
Are we predisposed to success or failure, to a particular destiny because of our DNA?

In the TV program, FINDING YOUR ROOTS, Louis Gates recently interviewed architect Maya Lin—who, you might recall, designed the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC. Gates was able to trace Maya's family line back one thousand years before Christ. And in his research he found, within her family, a strong line of independent and creative thinkers and artists—the kind of attributes which have found clear expression in Lin's own life.[2]
Sometimes I wish I had Jesus DNA flowing in my veins. Surely then it would be easier for me to tamp down the temptations I struggle with, to embody the principals that I claim to hold so dear.

But the takeaway from our gospel today is not that we are called to be Jesus. If we could manage to do that—to extricate ourselves from all that binds us, we would have no need of him!

[1] Find the article, based on U of Washington research, here: http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/science/depressed-a-smoker-blame-your-neanderthal-ancestry-uw-study-says/
[2] You can find the episode here: http://www.pbs.org/weta/finding-your-roots/visionaries-full-episode/14999/

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No, God doesn't expect us to be Jesus. But we are called to put our trust in him; and to believe him who in baptism, has named us, too, BELOVED!

Through the whole ordeal in the desert Jesus remembers and trusts this; remembers that his place in God's embrace in secure. And so he can say NO to the devil and YES to God.

Through the power of his cross and resurrection his strength becomes our strength.
We too are learning to say NO to the devil and all his empty promises and say YES to God.

And every time we dip our finger and make the sign of the cross...we say **YES.**
And every time we put out our hands to receive the bread of life... we say **YES**.
And every time we choose forgiveness over resentment... we say **YES**.
And every time we stare down Satan's attempts to sow doubt in our minds about our origin or our destiny...we say **YES**.

Jesus came to liberate us from all that would stand between us and complete trust in the God.
He begins by nullifying Satan's power. We are witnesses of that today.

And as we come to his Table, we share in his victory. And we pledge ourselves once more to conform our lives to his.

After all, it's in our DNA, or should I say BNA - BE NOT AFRAID.

Amen.