

Luke 3:23–38

²³Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, ²⁴son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, ²⁵son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, ²⁶son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, ²⁷son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, ²⁸son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, ²⁹son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, ³⁰son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, ³¹son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, ³²son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, ³³son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, ³⁴son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, ³⁵son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, ³⁶son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, ³⁷son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, ³⁸son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

Theological Perspective

People, in general, are curious to know their genealogical line. Being able to trace ancestral roots as far back in history as possible satisfies the human longing to connect to one's roots, locate oneself within a longer historical frame, and experience a sense of belonging to a particular human family that stands in continuity with the past. A genealogical search may be motivated by a desire to know the family journey and to pursue its great tradition in response to the present challenges. Others may excavate their genealogy because of some immediate benefits, such as to make a claim to an inheritance or to assert one's superiority over others.

How shall we take Luke's account of the genealogy of Jesus? What are his motivations? To answer these questions we need to consider his main thrust. His genealogy of Jesus is in continuity with his main message. It is his way of establishing the idea that Jesus is the Son of God, which is the final point of Luke's genealogical account. It is his way of establishing the divine origin of Jesus, a theological interest that is inseparable from another interest: the matter of salvation. Luke's genealogy of Jesus, the Son of God, is driven by his concern about salvation. The genealogy that finds its culmination in Jesus as the Son of God points to his essential role in salvation history.

Pastoral Perspective

What was Jesus doing during those thirty years before he began his ministry? Luke does not give us very much information (although more than the other evangelists). He describes the birth of Jesus, the angels and the shepherds, the naming ceremony, and the purification ceremony with Simeon and Anna. We know that the family returned from Bethlehem to Galilee and their own little town of Nazareth. At the age of twelve, we hear that Jesus went to the temple as part of the Passover celebration, where he caused a bit of an uproar. Other than that, Luke does not share a word about Jesus' life until his baptism.

There are several noncanonical Gospels that purport to tell stories of Jesus' youth, including one that has him breathing life into little birds that he formed from mud. Other pieces of folklore suggest that he traveled widely, seeking religious instruction from masters of many traditions. The topic of Jesus' youth and young adulthood has always been a source of interest and curiosity, and has been the subject of much speculation and storytelling.

Perhaps Jesus spent the first thirty years of his life simply living. One can imagine that he spent his youth learning a trade, apprenticed as a carpenter under Joseph. Others speculate that, because he does not appear in the stories of Jesus' ministry, Joseph

Exegetical Perspective

As is the case in Matthew's genealogy, Luke here traces Jesus' ancestry through his father, Joseph. Other similarities between Luke's and Matthew's genealogies include the references to Zerubbabel and Shealtiel in the postexilic period (3:27; Matt. 1:12) and identical lists of names covering the pre-monarchical period between Amminadab and David (3:31–33; Matt. 1:3–5) and the patriarchal period between Abraham and Hezron (3:33–34; Matt. 1:2–3). Despite these similarities, however, so many significant differences remain that scholars once speculated that Matthew had traced Jesus' ancestry through Joseph while Luke traces it through Mary. Such speculation, however, ignores the fact that Luke never mentions Mary in Jesus' genealogy.

The two genealogies share none of the same names in the monarchical period—with the exception of David—and only two names from the postexilic period. Another difference involves the role of women in the two genealogies. Matthew's genealogy includes four women; while Luke mentions more women in his Gospel than do the other Synoptic writers, Luke's genealogy includes no references to women. Another difference is that Luke's genealogy begins with Jesus and works its way back through Jesus' ancestry to Adam and God, whereas Matthew begins with Abraham and works forward to Jesus.

Homiletical Perspective

“. . . Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, *son of God*” (Luke 3:37–38). Can your genealogy do that? Luke traces Jesus' lineage back to the Creator of the first male creature. Not only will Jesus have a purpose; he will have a pedigree, a history, a relationship not only with ancestors and with the people of Israel but with the Creator of all things. He is, as the previous account of his baptism claims, God's Son (3:21–22), and if anyone somehow did not hear or misunderstood or did not believe the voice from heaven, here is further evidence, all seventy-seven generations of it.

Where is this text in the lectionary? It appears neither in the daily lectionary nor in the Sunday and festival lections for Luke's Year C. The Revised Common Lectionary skips from the baptism of Jesus to his teaching in the Nazareth synagogue (4:14), even holding the intervening episode, the wilderness temptation, for airing on the First Sunday in Lent. The lectionary preacher may feel relieved by the omission. Reading Luke 3:23–38 aloud in the worship service is a challenge. How do you pronounce “Reu” and “Arphaxad” and “Nahshon”? How would you proclaim good news with this text?

Matthew's Gospel also supplies a family tree, in which Jesus descends from the great patriarch

Luke 3:23–38

Theological Perspective

While, on one hand, the genealogy of Jesus points to his divine origin, on the other hand, it also points to his roots and connection to humanity. The Son of God is at the same time the son of Adam; he is the son of humanity. Like the claim that Jesus is the Son of God, the point that Jesus is the son of Adam is motivated by soteriological interest: it is essential to salvation history; it is at the heart of the incarnation. Jesus is of God and sent by God, who was embodied in human flesh to save humanity and the whole of creation. God in Jesus assumes the brokenness and suffering of humanity to save humanity and creation.

One should not, however, be content to speak of Jesus' humanity in generic ways. The generic human being does not exist. To assume humanity is to be part of a family and a tribe, as well as to be tied to a certain locale, with its distinctive geography, culture, and history. This is the case with Jesus, the Son of God. Choices were made prior to his own exercise of choice. We may speak of the choices that were made prior to one's exercise of agency as destiny, which is not the iron jacket of history but the circumstances in which one is born. In the case of Jesus, he was a man who was born in a place called Palestine and whose parents were Mary and Joseph. He grew up in the religious tradition of his parents, and felt called to bear witness to the coming reign of God. His witness offended the religious and political establishments of his time, which carried out the plot to kill him. Jesus was born under the Roman occupation, resisted the occupation, and was killed by the occupation forces.

Luke's brilliant genealogical account, which identifies Jesus as both the divine (Son of God) and the human (son of Adam), provides us with a theological frame to make a creative interpretation of the integration and interweaving of the divine and the human, of transcendence and immanence, of the spiritual and the material, and of the universal and the particular. Luke's genealogy of Jesus offers us a lens that holds our focus so that, as we go deeper into the particular, the specific, the earthy, and the mundane, we need not worry about losing the divine, the transcendent, the grand, and the universal.

Maybe, to our surprise, as we go deeper into the specific and the minute, our horizon opens up and widens: we see the divine in the earthy and the human, the transcendent in the immanent, the universal in the particular, the eternal in an hour, and the cosmos in a grain of sand. Immanence is not the opposite of transcendence; rather, immanence is the transcendent presence of the transcendent God in

Pastoral Perspective

may have died during Jesus' youth or young adulthood, which would have placed on the young Jesus the burden of caring for his mother and his family. Perhaps those first thirty years were filled with learning responsibility, taking care of family, participating in the community, and dealing with life's triumphs and setbacks. Perhaps those thirty years were spent laying a foundation for ministry, so that Jesus' teachings would be well grounded in the reality of living as a working person with responsibilities.

Whatever the reality of the situation might be, Luke chose to complete the framing of Jesus' background for ministry by stating his age and reciting his genealogy. It is as if Luke wanted to be certain that Theophilus, his reader, had every bit of the background he needed to understand fully the fulfillment of prophecy in the life of John the Baptist, and then to understand how John's life played its role in fulfilling prophecy about Jesus. The establishment of the Davidic lineage of Jesus is an important part of that story.

We notice first that Luke's genealogy is full of people who walked closely with God. We encounter David, the king whom God loved, and Boaz, the just protector of Ruth. We see Jacob, who wrestled with God, and Abraham, the father of great peoples. We find Noah, and Methuselah, and Enoch, and then we settle on Adam, the first person, the one who walked with God in Eden. Jesus comes from a long line of the faithful whose exploits and encounters with God fill our Scriptures. As Luke documents Jesus' descent from David, Luke uses the prophecies of Micah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel to validate and support his description of Jesus as messianic king.

It is notable that, among these examples, Luke does not mention the extraordinary women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. For instance, he omits Bathsheba because he traces a different path of ancestry from David, but he also omits Rahab and Ruth. Perhaps it was not important to Luke's documentation of qualifications that Jesus' ancestry included a prostitute who saved Israel and a foreigner who defined and embodied loyalty.

In the second place, Luke's genealogy is used to establish legal credibility. As if heralding the birth of Jesus by angels was insufficient to establish his credentials as the awaited Messiah, Luke produces the full messianic bloodline to bolster Jesus' case. Even in the face of miracles, we still want to examine his documents. We are often so inclined to focus on the traditional and ordinary ways of establishing validity or authenticity that we can miss or dismiss

Exegetical Perspective

Finally, in Matthew, the genealogy immediately precedes the story of Jesus' birth, while in Luke it precedes the "beginning" of his ministry (v. 23).

While the identification of Jesus as "thirty years old" may have been meant to imply full maturity (Num. 4:3) or to echo the ages of David (2 Sam. 5:4) and Joseph (Gen. 41:46) when they began significant phases in their own lives, it also situates the ministry of Jesus around the middle of the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius (3:1). Luke's interpretive commentary, "as was thought," when referring to Jesus as the son of Joseph (v. 23), clearly links the genealogy to 1:26–35, where Jesus has already been identified as "Son of God."

As previously stated, the only name shared by Luke's and Matthew's genealogies during the monarchial period is David. Matthew's focus on the Davidic kings of Judah in the period from David to Babylonian captivity (Matt. 1:6–11) serves to authenticate the "kingly" lineage and image of Jesus—"king of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37). This kingly image is further highlighted in the birth and infancy narrative found in Matthew, where a star—often used to symbolize the birth of a new king—marks the birth of Jesus. Royal dignitaries from the east follow the star looking for "the child who has been born king of the Jews" and bringing gifts to honor him (Matt. 2:1–12). In contrast, virtually all of the names in Luke's genealogy from David to Babylonian captivity are unknown (vv. 27–31). Luke even traces Jesus' ancestry through David's son Nathan rather than King Solomon (v. 31).¹ It appears that the Lukan genealogy intentionally avoids all of the Davidic kings. Similarly, Jesus' birth in Luke is not depicted as the birth of a king, but rather the birth of one placed in a barn manger among animals—born to poor and destitute parents who could not afford a lamb to sacrifice when Jesus was presented in the temple for purification (2:1–7, 22–24).

While Matthew's genealogy highlights both David and Abraham, two significant figures within Jewish history, neither David's nor Abraham's place is explicitly highlighted in Luke's genealogy. Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham, while Luke's genealogy goes beyond Abraham, tracing Jesus back through prepatriarchal ancestors to Adam and then to God. Jesus in Luke is not merely the Jewish Messiah in the lineage of Abraham and David; Jesus is the Messiah sent for all people. He is a descendant of

1. While it is unclear if the tradition has any bearing on the genealogies found in Matthew and Luke, Zech. 12:12–13 does suggest a possible division in the Davidic line, pitting "the house of David" against "the house of Nathan."

Homiletical Perspective

Abraham. Luke, however, reverses the direction of ancestry, going from the immediacy of Joseph, Jesus' father, "as was thought," to Noah and the covenant with all the earth, to the universality of Adam, the father of humankind. Luke continues to develop the theme of "all the people" (3:21) from the preceding baptismal narrative, now even broadening the earlier definition of "all the people" as Israel, "Abraham and his descendants" (1:55; also 1:73), to "all peoples" as both Israel and the Gentiles (2:31–32). God's family is universal; God's grace is for all humankind. Good news!

What would take a preacher to this text?

James McClendon was convinced that lives were the real data for Christian theology; he called it "biography as theology."¹ Persons embody convictions—"tenacious beliefs" in his description—about God. Not only in words, but especially in actions that convey values, visions, and convictions, our lives bring to expression our foundational beliefs about who God is. What difference do those lives make for a community? Christianity turns upon the character of Christ, embodied in the living witness of people and communities of faith. Who are the "fresh exemplars" in our own time? A homiletical approach to this text tells the stories of living witness.

A Service of Baptism. This genealogy might be included with Luke 3:21–22, setting the identity of Jesus as God's Son in the larger picture of God's story with humankind. There are not many Zerubabels or Amminadabs or Methuselahs at the baptismal font these days, but Jesus' ancestors are not without contemporary namesakes, Joshuas and Nathans, Jacobs and Noahs. A connection might be drawn between the name of a male baptizand and a great-great-great-great-grandfather of Jesus, opening a biblical character to contemporary awareness and example in a sermon, pointing to a story in the Hebrew Scriptures that is unfamiliar to the congregation.

Such a namesake homiletic, however, is limited by the gender exclusivity here. Unlike Matthew, Luke's cloud of witnesses does not include women; and even though Matthew names only four women in his genealogy of Jesus (Rahab, Ruth, "the wife of Uriah," and Mary, Matt. 1:1–17), their stories send signals about the unexpected twists in God's journey with God's people. God makes surprising choices! Luke's

1. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press Int., 1990).

Luke 3:23–38

Theological Perspective

manifold particularities. Immanence is the other side of transcendence. Similarly, if something is universal, it must be particularly present. This is the heart of God's economy of salvation, the heart of the incarnation, and the scandal of particularity. God's universal saving love finds its way into the world only through the particular. If, as we often say, the devil is in the details, God must also be in the details or the particular. In Jesus, the Son of God, God's universal saving love has become particular, particularly embodied in the most destitute and downtrodden, to bring salvation for all.

So, what started out as a focus on the particular—genealogical excavation—finds its end point in generous and hospitable universality. Luke's genealogical excavation, contrary to the ways of this world, functions as a way to subvert the assertion of privilege by virtue of one's ancestral lineage and exclusivist claims. It tells us that we should not equate particularity with exclusivism. The central message of the incarnation—a supreme exemplar of God's particularity—is not God's exclusivity, but God's radical hospitality and particular availability. God has made God's self particular, in order to speak the good news to every time and clime. Rootedness to the local is not a prison house; rather, it is an entry point of connections to the wider world.

We are all located in a specific time and place, and we belong to a certain family and nation, but we can live in ways that embody hearts much wider than our family lineage and national affiliations. It is not a contradiction to love one's family and nation and still love global justice. In fact, loving global justice is the only way truly to love one's family and nation. We may be from various nations, but we have one genealogical root: we are all children of Adam and we are all children of God. Our genealogical beginning and eschatological ending is to live as God's children.

ELEAZAR S. FERNANDEZ

Pastoral Perspective

the indications of credibility and character that come in unexpected or unconventional ways. This conventional kind of thinking allows us to appreciate a coworker or a neighbor who is friendly, cares for his wife and children, and works hard making a living, but nevertheless to support our government's deporting him because his family crossed the border illegally during his childhood. We place a higher premium on appropriate historical and legal credentialing than on significant, firsthand evidence that this person is a good and productive neighbor.

In the third place, we can also look to genealogy and history for disqualifying factors. In vetting Jesus' qualifications to be considered Messiah, the fact that his human bloodline can be traced back to King David was vital. In hindsight, however, that concern seems simply trivial in light of the truth that Jesus' bloodline flows miraculously and directly from the living God. From a legalistic perspective, certain boxes must be checked but can never account for the unusual factors that might provide the best evidence of a person's true identity and character. Does a lifetime of peaceful living and productive citizenship suffice to restore the voting rights of a person convicted of a serious felony in his or her youth?

Reflecting on the genealogy in Luke invites us to examine why we look to Jesus as Messiah. Is it because all of the prophecies are fulfilled in a legally defensible way? Do we see Jesus as the Son of God because we can trace his bloodline back to the first man, whom Luke refers to as "son of God"? Is he the Messiah and Son of God because the whole fabric of his life and ministry reveals this truth to us? Dwelling with the genealogy gives us room to hold both the legal and the experiential evidence up to the light, in order to see how they influence us and affect each other. The genealogy is not the only evidence that Luke presents to establish the true identity of Jesus for Theophilus. It is one of many factors that Luke brings to the table to construct a more complete description of the truth. Perhaps we should keep this in mind as we consider "litmus test" judgments of those around us. What does the complete picture show?

LARRY DUGGINS

Exegetical Perspective

the world's first people—before ethnic identities and divisions.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a Canaanite woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). Jesus is portrayed in Matthew as the anticipated Jewish Messiah sent to deliver the Jewish people. In Luke, however, the Jewishness of Jesus is not as strongly emphasized. The recipients of Jesus’ ministry are identified less by ethnicity than by social status. The Jesus of Luke is depicted as one born under Roman oppression—his family travels for days from Nazareth to Bethlehem while Mary is pregnant, because Emperor Augustus has ordered a census. Jesus is born in a manger with no star or royal dignitaries to honor him. He and his family live their lives in poverty on the margins of society. When he delivers his first public address in Luke, he declares it is to the poor that he has been sent (4:16–19). According to Luke, Jesus has been sent not merely to the lost sheep of the house of Israel but to all in need, because he is not merely the son of David and the son of Abraham—he is the Son of God. Luke’s genealogy is the only known ancient Jewish genealogy that traces ancestry beyond ethnic identities and human origins all the way back to God, making Jesus a savior for all creation.

The differences between the genealogies of Jesus found in Luke and Matthew clearly demonstrate how theological and literary constructions often take precedence over historical accuracy. As modern readers we should be cautious, therefore, not to be too insistent on making historical arguments based on these genealogies. Even some attitudes in the Bible toward genealogies are quite negative, classifying them with “myths” and emphasizing the worthless and meaningless speculation often associated with genealogies (see 1 Tim. 1:4 and Titus 3:9).

Luke ends Jesus’ genealogy with the assertion that his line can be traced to the “son of Adam, son of God,” clearly connecting Jesus’ genealogy to the words spoken by the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism and bringing the account of Jesus’ preparation to a close before beginning the narration of Jesus’ ministry—a ministry that is, like his baptism and preparation, anointed and led by God’s Spirit (3:21–22; 4:1, 18–19).

GUY D. NAVE JR.

Homiletical Perspective

genealogy does not deviate from a consistent patriarchy, and hearing it read aloud will be a reminder of the cultural distance between text and context in congregations where teaching and preaching have acknowledged and critiqued a patriarchal worldview and embraced a God-given, God-driven gender equality. A sermon on this text might be shaped by asking, “What is wrong with this picture? Who is missing in this family tree?” and offering some answers. A bold and creative preacher might craft a genealogy of women.

Worship Services Celebrating Ordinations or Church Anniversaries. Luke 3:23–38 could be called upon to proclaim the good news of God’s steadfast presence and unfolding purpose from the beginning, generation to generation. Sermons on such occasions lift up the faithful witness of our ancestors and challenge the present community to carry the gospel into a new day. A scriptural genealogy opens an opportunity to look at some newer branches of the family tree of faith. What lives might be lifted up as a witness for us and for our children’s children? Hebrews 12:1–2 and the image of “so great a cloud of witnesses” might provide a helpful scriptural partner here. Our lives are not only descended from a long line of those who pursued and glimpsed God’s promises but are also “surrounded” by their continuing influence.

A Watchnight, New Year’s Day, or First Sunday of a New Year Service. A sermon could pair this genealogy with names from those annually published lists of the notable and the notorious who died in the past year. These lists yield figures in politics, the arts, sports, and popular culture; every year the heavens also open to some who have made significant contributions to theology and ethics, who have provided leadership in the religious community, and whose faith has impelled leadership on more secular ground. The preacher who culls the death notices in denominational newsletters and church journals will find an array of “sermon examples” in actual lives that have embodied God’s hopes and dreams for humankind, sometimes at great cost with little recognition. Preached into a world that is saturated with celebrity and starved for significance, these exemplars inspire the faithfulness of a new generation.

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

Luke 4:1–13

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Theological Perspective

It has often been said that the temptations in the wilderness increase in spiritual intensity and value, from the simple need of the organism for food through the human drive for earthly power to a direct human challenge to God’s nature. The perversions the devil represents in this passage follow and mock the developmental curve of the human spirit. That so many theologians have thought this reveals at least one thing: doing theology has been the privilege of the well fed. Only someone who has never been hungry would treat the pain of physical hunger in so offhanded a manner. The ancient texts we revere as Scripture may have first been circulated orally by ordinary people, but they were *written* by people with bellies full enough that there was time to become literate. Most poor people in those days could not read or write and did not have enough to eat.

However, let us pursue this ancient idea of an ascending order of importance in the temptations on its own terms for a moment: it is true that the fact of our capacity and desire to reflect upon the nature of our being is what makes us human. Animals get hungry too, and they certainly erect hierarchies of power, but they do not ponder the nature and limits of the divine providence once they have eaten their fill. Our capacity even to *desire* spiritual autonomy depends upon our physical needs for food, water,

Pastoral Perspective

This story of the temptation of Jesus is intriguing, even mysterious, to most twenty-first-century people. Few of us know anyone who has fasted for forty days, and fewer have undertaken prolonged fasting ourselves. Not many of us have encountered the devil in so tangible a form as to transport us to a distant city.

However, many of us have been baptized in water in the name of the triune God. Perhaps we have also felt the touch of oil on our foreheads, accompanied by a prayer that the Holy Spirit will fill us and guide us into lives holy to God and loving to our neighbors. Although the ritual may only take a few minutes, baptism is part of a lifelong journey with God and other travelers.

So perhaps we can imagine ourselves taking time on the journey in a quiet place in the presence of God, far from our busy lives. There we can attend to our souls, to the calling of God within us, and to deep questions about life that we often suppress. As difficult as it may be to focus on these central issues, when we do, we often emerge “full of the Spirit” (v. 1), radiant, full of holy joy and good intentions.

Would it not be good if we could return to our homes and our work refreshed, changed forever? Early Christians believed for many years that baptism not only freed them from past sins, but also

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Exegetical Perspective

Luke carefully introduces the identity of Jesus at the outset of the Gospel. Birth, adolescence, baptism, and genealogy give way to one final episode before the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry: temptation. The Greek verb translated “to tempt” in verse 2 (*peirazō*) implies hostile intent. Repeatedly Jesus is approached by the devil with temptations to become other than the Son of God he is created to be.

The tradition of Jesus’ temptation is widely attested in early Christian literature (see Heb. 2:14–18; 4:15 and instances of testing in John 6:14–15; 7:1–9; 12:27–28), but the temptation account is a Synoptic scene. Mark introduces core elements such as the Spirit, the wilderness, forty days, and Satan in his characteristic Cliff’s Notes rendering (Mark 1:12–13). Matthew and Luke follow Mark’s placement of the scene and build upon Mark’s account, utilizing a common source. While Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts have much in common, key differences underscore the function of the scene in Luke. Most importantly, while Matthew and Luke share the same three temptations, their sequencing differs. Matthew moves from bread in the desert to the pinnacle of the temple to a high mountain, anticipating the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel on a mountain in Galilee. In Luke, the final two temptations are reversed, so that the climactic moment occurs at

Homiletical Perspective

Rembrandt drew several depictions of the devil tempting Jesus. In one of them the two look like friends. They appear to be ambling down a country road, deep in conversation. The devil is a half step behind Jesus. His head is skeletal, but there is an urgent, deeply human look on his face. He is reasoning with Jesus, not menacing him. One of his wings is thrown over Jesus’ shoulder in an almost familial manner. He leans in, mouth open slightly, eyes on Christ, speaking quietly, a heavy stone in his hands. He holds the stone out as if it were a gift. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (v. 3).

It is a scene of powerful intimacy. Despite his wings, Satan does not look monstrous. He looks reasonable. Most of our temptations are. Rembrandt captures this truth powerfully. It is easy to identify with Jesus in his drawing, just as it is easy to identify with Jesus in this pericope. Perhaps too easy. Jesus is tempted to sacrifice the truth of who he is for material gain, prestige, power. We have all faced such temptation. As a result preachers are tempted to use these verses as a platform from which to talk about humanity.

We should resist this impulse. We should let the story reveal something new about God, instead of simply reminding us of things we already know

Luke 4:1–13

Theological Perspective

and shelter being adequately met; we will not lift our eyes higher than our own empty plates if these basic needs are not met. Yet lift our eyes we will, as soon as we are able, and we will question everything. This is so universal a human quality that we assign ages to it. Age four is the year of “Why?” about the world. The working of God’s will occupies the minds of seven-year-olds in ways different from the ways in which five-year-olds consider it. Young adults jettison their childhood God with enough regularity that even churchgoing parents may not be particularly alarmed by their rebellion. “It is a stage,” they tell each other consolingly, as they remember their own youthful agnosticism.

That human sorrows like poverty and hunger can cramp the spirit’s growth is no reason for us to deny the power or worth of that growth. Indeed, one attending to the spiritual life can and should draw the moral imperative that every human being has the God-given right to attend to it as well. What keeps my brother or sister chained to a never-ending search for the next meal should also keep me from the unreflective enjoyment of my own wider horizons: my spiritual freedom is intimately connected to my neighbor’s well-being. The church has recognized this for centuries in the pairing of spirituality and service to the poor, to children, to the sick. Almost all convents and monasteries, whose main spiritual task is prayer, also exercise some kind of specific and intentional ministry to those in need.

The idea that contemplation and activism are somehow exclusive of one another is neither useful nor accurate; few mystics, modern or medieval, would recognize the separation of one from the other as having anything to do with their vocation. Even the prayer lives for which they are revered are understood to be prayer on behalf of the world. The most cloistered solitary is *active*: active in intercessory relationship with the workers outside her enclosure.

Here then is the temptation the devil left out: he does not tempt the love that forms the second half of the Great Commandment common to all the Abrahamic faiths: love God and love your neighbor. The temptations in the wilderness are self-absorbed, aimed at Jesus alone: his hunger, his lust for power, his equality with God. Yet if the incarnation has any meaning at all, it must surely mean this: Jesus does not permit himself to stand alone. His love is saving love, inclusive of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived or ever will live. The devil does not tempt Jesus’ saving love in this story. He does not

Pastoral Perspective

that they could hope to live righteously for the rest of their lives; but as time passed, realism set in. Christians have learned (no matter Charles Wesley’s sung prayer that God would “take away the love of sinning”¹) that living in holiness is not as easy as we might hope.

Therefore, at the very time when it seems we have risen to new spiritual heights, something usually conspires to draw us down to earth again. Other inner voices—some call it the devil—attempt to lure us away from our identity as baptized children of God. Hence, what happens next in Luke’s text is not really surprising, even if it may not be so easy to find analogies in our own lives to the temptations Jesus endured.

We would hardly blame anyone famished from fasting forty days for doing anything necessary to get food, but Jesus resisted the devil, who said, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (v. 3), subtly trying to undermine the divine word at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:22). *If you are a child of God, if you are the son or daughter of God, then prove it, then take advantage of it. Work a little magic!* Jesus answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone’” (4:4, quoting Deut. 8:3). What in our lives at the office, at high school, at home lures us to forget who we are as children of God and tempts us to trade in our inheritance in Christ for a few crumbs of bread?

Next the devil offers Jesus the glory and power of ruling all the kingdoms of this world, if only Jesus will worship him (vv. 5–7). We would like to think that, like Jesus, we would quickly refuse the devil’s offer: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve God only’” (4:8, quoting Deut. 6:13). Active Christians would not necessarily succumb in order to rule over millions of people or have access to untold wealth, but we might be seduced by seemingly good reasons. Perhaps we would be willing to bend our sense of ethics in order to make a positive difference in the world, to solve problems, or to help others. Perhaps, like the pastor who is too busy doing “ministry” to pray, or the church treasurer who cooks the books to make it appear his family is a leading giver, our desire for recognition could lure us away from our values and the worship of God. This tricky temptation to gain power may play on our greed, our good intentions, or our weak

1. Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 366.

Exegetical Perspective

the temple, a locus of salvation for Luke and the site where the Gospel begins and ends. Thus Luke's narrative of temptation not only marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but also reveals much about how it will proceed.

References to Jesus' identity as the Son of God form bookends for Luke's account, appearing in the first and final temptations. The divine sonship attached to Jesus throughout his birth and adolescence and then proclaimed decisively from heaven at his baptism is now the focus of temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' status as *the* Son of God is reinforced by Luke's description in verse 1 that he is "full of the Holy Spirit," which descended at the Jordan and will continue to play a prominent role throughout Luke-Acts. The phrase "full of the Holy Spirit" occurs more than a dozen times in Luke-Acts (see references to Peter, Stephen, Barnabas, and Paul), but never in Matthew, Mark, or John. Jesus is "led by/in the Spirit" (v. 1), reflecting relationship and solidarity shared with the Spirit (like Simeon in 2:27), as opposed to Mark's description that "the Spirit drove him into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12). Jesus' identity is further emphasized through the devil's repeated use of "If you are the Son of God," which not only acknowledges Jesus' identity but also seeks to exploit it and offer an alternative vision for Jesus to embody. While Jesus never engages the "if," he is asked to deliberate about what divine sonship means. Jesus decides what it means to be Jesus.

The story proceeds in a triadic pattern typical of Jewish folklore (employed again by Luke in Peter's denial in 22:54-62 and the threefold taunting of Jesus in 23:35, 37, 39). First, the devil approaches him when he is already hungry with the temptation to command a stone to become bread. Unlike Matthew, Luke's account describes a single stone, and thus may be conceived as an individualistic temptation for Jesus to feed himself. In the second temptation, the devil offers authority and glory of "all the kingdoms of the world." Whereas Matthew describes the kingdoms of the *kosmos* ("world") Luke uses the politically laden noun *oikoumenē*. For Luke, *kosmos* typically refers to creation (9:25; 12:30), while *oikoumenē* generally refers to the political order (as in 2:1; 21:26; Acts 17:6). Luke conceives of a struggle between two kingdoms. The social-political order previously presented as under the charge of Rome (2:1; 3:1) is here revealed as a counterkingdom ruled by the devil, whose authority now dangles before Jesus. In the final temptation, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and there, in this cultic center so vital to

Homiletical Perspective

about ourselves. Samuel Wells makes this argument forcefully in an essay about Lenten preaching. He writes that this passage "has a tendency to lead either into the Scylla of exploring our personal temptations to multiply food, jump off temples, and rule the world, or the Charybdis of setting up our petty greed, lust, and pride as some kind of equivalent to God's choice in Christ never to be except to be with us; two equally absurd, but frequently practiced homiletical directions."¹

If we follow Wells's advice, sidestepping our dominating fixation on humanity should help us preach about God. In this passage Jesus chooses a certain way of being, one that makes the cross inevitable, even as it contradicts many of the assumptions we bring to our understanding of God.

One way to read the devil's three temptations is to view them as corresponding to our preferred definitions of divinity. Every congregation is at risk of projecting its own particular definitions onto heaven and then mistaking them for God. Sooner or later, every congregation is guilty of this mistake. Every Christian is too. We want God to be all-powerful in each of the realms the devil tempts Jesus. We want God to hold ultimate authority in every arena, be it economic (the bread in vv. 3-4), political (the kingdoms in v. 5), or spiritual (the miraculous power in vv. 9-11). However, to each of these Jesus says no.

In a congregation that risks idolizing charitable giving or social justice, a preacher might explore the fact that in this lesson Jesus refuses to feed the hungry. We may want God to side with our efforts toward achieving economic parity, but in this instance Jesus fails to get on board. In a congregation that equates God with nationalism, a preacher could explore the fact that in this lesson Jesus declines to become the ruler of *any* nation. We may want to believe that God is the force behind our nation's power, but Jesus refuses to wield such authority. Finally, in a congregation that wants to believe God is a master of the supernatural, a preacher might explore the fact that Jesus tells the devil he will not indulge in such performances.

Imagine if he had. If Jesus had agreed to any of the devil's offers, he would have become an ancient revolutionary, a skillful politician, or a beloved magician. He would have become an unusually powerful person—which is not really that unusual. Every age is replete with powerful people. A preacher might

1. Samuel Wells, "Lenten Preaching in the United States," *Journal for Preachers* 36, no. 2 (2013): 10.

Luke 4:1–13

Theological Perspective

say, “Worship me and I will not destroy the people you love: your parents, your disciples, your friends, that innocent mother and baby, the defenseless old man you passed on the road here.” He tempts Jesus’ divine power, but stops short of even trying to tempt the divine love.

The temptations introduce the questions that will absorb the better part of the church’s theological attention in the first four centuries of its existence: Who is God? What can we assert about God’s nature? How does Jesus relate to God the Father? However, they attempt to answer these questions in a vacuum: the same limitations apply to the three temptations as apply to the creeds, the fruits of those first few centuries of Christian thought. In the creeds, speculative attempts to describe God echo down the ages to us. They try to tell us who God is, but they do not even try to tell us who *we* are, what we should do, or what is the nature of the good in human affairs. There is no moral theology in the creeds, and there is none in the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

If we were writing the creeds today, they would be very different documents. They would make an attempt to link human behavior to the nature of God, rather than considering the divine nature on its own. If we were writing the creeds today, they would contain ethics as well as systematic theology. If we were writing Gospels today, the same: we would imagine Jesus tempted ethically, in the spirit of what we have come to call the Great Commandment. In the wilderness, Jesus gathers strength for the life that awaits him beyond the wilderness. It is a painful but fruitful time, and he emerges not only into self-knowledge, but into an activism that will take many forms in the short years remaining to him: healing, teaching, and confronting the unjust power structures of his world.

BARBARA CAWTHORNE CRAFTON

Pastoral Perspective

self-esteem and lead us away from worshipping God and living out our baptismal covenant. How important it is to remain grounded, as Jesus was, in who we are as children of God, supported by Scripture that reminds us to worship only the Holy One!

Still the devil persists, this time spiring Jesus away to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple, with Scripture as a weapon: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. God will command angels to protect you . . . so that you will not dash your foot against a stone” (vv. 9–11, quoting Ps. 91:11–12). Jesus says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (v. 12, quoting Deut. 6:16). In other words, trust God, but do not test God’s love by taking a foolhardy risk, then crying for rescue. “I know I did not study for this test/prepare this sermon/practice this music, but get me through, God, by your Spirit.” Seek a deeper relationship with God, based on love and prayer, not only on frantic emergency calls or tests to prove God’s goodwill.

Temptation takes many forms. The reasons we succumb are as diverse as our life stories. This means that interpreting this passage calls for close reading of the contexts in which the worshipers live, so that the congregation can make connections with this familiar yet mysterious passage. While any practice that leads us away from God and our authentic selves may deserve exploration, reflection on this passage should not be trivialized (for example, by jokes about consuming chocolates hurriedly if Valentine’s Day precedes the beginning of Lent). Instead, teaching and preaching should explore what it means to worship God fully with our lives and how to discern the divine will when making decisions, based in our identity as children of God who are called and gifted by the Holy Spirit to live out our baptismal faith in the world.

RUTH C. DUCK

Exegetical Perspective

the Gospel of Luke, the devil quotes from Psalm 91 in an effort to persuade Jesus: “throw yourself down from here.”

All three temptations invite palpable displays of power. Each engages a different dimension critical to competing conceptions of Messiah—the material/economic, the political, and the religious—thereby forcing a decision over what it means to be the Son of God.

To understand Jesus’ response, the text invites the reader to look back. Among its many echoes, the details and themes of the passage link the temptation of Jesus to the wandering of Israel. Like Israel, Jesus is hungry in the wilderness. He is also tempted to “fall down and worship,” but no golden calf is minted. The setting, the symbolism of forty days, the character of the three temptations, and the replies of Jesus, all taken directly from Deuteronomy, point to the trials of Israel, with one critical difference: whereas the children of God at times succumbed to their trials, the Son of God emerges faithful, true, and strengthened in his identity.

The temptation also prompts a look ahead, foreshadowing the entire narrative. Jesus leaves the wilderness having faithfully determined the scope of his identity as the Son of God, which he will embody throughout the remainder of the Gospel. In his ministry, as in his temptation, he moves from the wilderness to the mountain to the temple, and along the way gracefully meets the economic, political, and religious challenges before him. The devil meanwhile, after departing “until an opportune time” (*kairos* or “special time” in v. 13, as opposed to the *chronos* time of v. 5), later reenters the story and claims Judas Iscariot (22:3), thereby setting in motion the mechanics that ultimately lead to Jesus’ death. In Luke 23:37 the “if” returns to the narrative (“let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God”; see also 23:35 and 23:39). Perhaps remembering his strength in the wilderness, Jesus prays resolutely in the garden, “Not my will but yours be done” (22:42). Once again, no angels appear outside Jerusalem to bear him up beyond the risk and the trauma. Yet, as the Gospel concludes, the resurrected Son of God is triumphantly “carried up into heaven” (24:51).

ALAN P. SHEROUSE

Homiletical Perspective

consider contemporary figures that fall into the devil’s categories and then ask whether anyone will remember their names in two thousand years, let alone sing hymns to them in worship.

This text appears on the first Sunday of Lent. This means that it is the first step in the season’s relentless movement toward the cross. Had Jesus responded differently to the devil, his story would have ended differently. By refusing to practice human power, Jesus made himself vulnerable to human power. For centuries Christianity has suggested that this is because he was born to suffer. A sermon on this story could explore the fact that this lesson suggests otherwise. It suggests that the form of strength God chooses to practice is quite different from all of our human understandings of strength and is therefore subject to them. We tend to think of Jesus practicing a steely resolve in this lesson. However, it could be argued that he is choosing weakness.

This is not to say that the story reveals God’s permanent incapacity. If one wants to make that sort of claim, it is best saved for Good Friday. Just as God cannot be boxed into our presuppositions about strength, God cannot be limited by our understanding of weakness. As noted above, one can imagine Jesus choosing to practice traditional forms of power. Indeed, there are times in his ministry when he does so. This story does not make abstract claims about the true nature of God. It simply shows Jesus making a choice. He refuses to define his ministry with the kind of power we tend to idolize. This suggests that such power contradicts the love that God is revealing through him. In order to reveal that love at the end of Lent, Jesus must practice it at the season’s onset.

MATT FITZGERALD