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Imposter Syndrome

Luke 4:1-13 NRSV, emended

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. There 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.' "

Then the devil led Jesus up and showed him in an instant all the nations of the world. And 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.' "

Then the devil took Jesus 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, for it is written,

'God will give commands to the angels concerning you, to protect you;'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered the devil, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When every test was completed, the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time.

Imposter Syndrome. The idea is that, despite evidence to the contrary—being intelligent, well-qualified, adaptable—some of us are pretty sure we're about to found out as frauds. That one day, someone is going to storm into our office saying, "Who do you think you are?," pack our stuff in a recycled paper box, and leave us on the curb, exposed for everything we don't know, haven't done, and are not. In my experience, Imposter Syndrome isn't limited to the workplace. It is how we feel as parents, caregivers, friends, even as Christians. We're often afraid that if other people knew what we were really like we wouldn't be welcomed here. And if God knew what we were really like...well, it is easy to picture God like an interrogator, shining a too-bright light on us in a darkened room: Who do you think you are?

Throughout Biblical history, actually, it isn't God who shines that kind of a light on us, but God's, um, colleague? Henchman? Satan. In Hebrew *hasatan* means accuser. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, Satan functions as God's building inspector*:

investigating, finding fault. Satan tests the fabric of creation to see if it holds. Satan isn't God's adversary, but works to strengthen creation by revealing its weaknesses. By the time Satan is rendered from Hebrew to Greek, he become *diabolos*, like diabolical. He's the slanderer. His tests primed to expose imposters: Who do you think you are?

And so the Slanderer quietly approaches Jesus. And Jesus, he's, like, trying to have a spiritual awakening. Just like the ancient Israelites, who went from Red Sea to Sinai desert, Jesus goes from water to wilderness. He was filled with the spirit, named and claimed at his baptism in the River Jordan, but now he is hungry, depleted. I cannot help but think one of the questions of the wilderness - for Israel, for Jesus, for us - is are we worthy of the salvation we've just received? It is in this moment that the Slanderer sidles up to Jesus, like the snake in the Garden of Eden, and quietly whispers, "If you are the Child of God..." It is a statement meant to hit Jesus where it counts: "Who do you think you are?"

Of course, Jesus *should* think he is the Child of God. Gabriel told his mother, Mary. Elizabeth confirmed it. Mary sang it. Simeon and Anna in the temple prophesied it. A voice from heaven declared it. He's got the credentials, the qualifications, the experience, the personality. He's the real deal. But one little question threatens to topple it: "Who do you think you are?"

Each of these tests was about Jesus's identity: will you be the one to feed the people? to rule them? to save them? "You're hungry, the people are hungry...make some bread." "It's pretty frustrating being under the thumb of Rome, here are *all* the nations of the world, yours..." "Won't Daddy protect you?" And, you know what, that's the Devil's big misstep. It is as if Jesus wakes up. Wait a minute, who are you testing here? Me? Or my father? Because even if I do not know who I am, God does.

I have come to believe the Devil is real. I don't believe the devil is red with horns, a pointy tail, and a carrying a pitchfork. But I know the voice of the tempter, the accuser, the slanderer. I know the question, "Who do I think I am?" It is a plague that will not leave. Do I have what it takes? Can I do what I believe I am called to do? Can I withstand what is to come? It is so easy to succumb to the belief that I am not good enough, not smart enough, not strong enough, not righteous enough, not faithful enough. As an example, let me offer you a brief list of the things they didn't cover in seminary: roofing shingles; drainage tile; industrial dishwashers; organizational fraud; the juvenile penal system; making ashes for Ash Wednesday; organ maintenance; how to play the ukulele; video editing; pandemics. I'm sure you have the same kind of list. I have lists for being a spouse, a mother, a friend. And, while I want to hide behind the fact that there is no school for life, no guide book, the fact is, I will never be enough. Who do I think I am? While that may be the fact, the truth is, even if I do not know, God does.

There is no quick-fix for dealing with the devil; there is no easy way to solve that voice inside you which endlessly asks, "Who do you think you are?" Martin Luther threw ink pots across his study, aiming for the devil. He was so plagued by self-doubt, by the constant refrain that he was not good enough, not faithful enough, not lovely enough to be loved by God. It was such a constant problem for him that his work is riddled with advice

for dealing with the devil in this form. Laugh at it, he wrote. Make the sign of the cross. Seek the company of other believers. Confess your sins. And, if all else fails...break wind, even the devil is offended by the smell.

As if on cue, I woke up this morning in the same place I often do: cycling through my emails; my endless to-do list; the people I haven't called, visited, followed-up with; all the reasons I'm unqualified for this job. It has been a wearying few weeks, a wilderness of phone calls, of bouncing between hospitals, the office, home, never fully landing anywhere. I am a constant witness to life and light and grace, but also a constant questioner of my worthiness to see it. I may not always know who I am, but God knows.

Psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes developed the concept of imposter syndrome in 1978. Since then, we've filled conferences and engaged endless special speakers trying to help women and people of color, those most likely to feel like imposters. But recently I read in the *Harvard Business Review* that despite all this, we've never done anything to address the root cause: the micro (and macro) aggressions that tear people down. We've replaced what was with more of the same. We load messages that some people don't deserve what they've earned with the idea that your doubts are something else you must overcome and failure to do so is another piece of proof that you don't belong here. The disciplines of Lent, then—self-examination, fasting, sacrificial giving and acts of love—are aimed at helping others see and feel and know what God knows: that they—we—are Children of God.

Who *do* you think you are, Beloved? The unending truth of grace is that God knows who you are. The season of Lent asks us again and again to return to this truth, the truth revealed in our baptisms: this is my beloved child. God knows who you are.

Amen.

*Richard Swanson introduced me to this metaphor in *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*.