

## **The God-Shaped Vacuum**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
A new church for a new day, in Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, February 17, 2013, by Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)

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My favorite commercial from the Super Bowl two weeks ago was not the baby Clydesdale ad—although I will admit feeling a bit choked up at the end of that one. No, my favorite was the one for the new Mercedes Benz CLA. In it, actor Sebastian Beacon is sitting in a run-down, empty coffee shop, gazing out the window, and watching workmen put a up a new billboard advertising the snazzy new Mercedes. He looks away from the window, and there sitting across from him is the Devil, played by an appropriately diabolical Willem Dafoe, with a red twinkle in his eye and menacingly pointy fingernails. He’s holding a glowing fountain pen in his hand, and he pushes a gothic-looking contract across the table at Sebastian Beacon.

“Make a deal with me, kid,” he says, “and you can have the car, and everything that goes along with it.” As he reaches for the pen, Sebastian Beacon suddenly finds himself living out a stereotypical young man’s fantasy—stepping onto the red carpet with supermodel Kate Upton; on the dance floor with R&B entertainer Usher; racing down a desert highway toward Las Vegas with three beautiful women in the car; on the cover of every hip celebrity magazine, being chased by screaming teen girls, and driving in a formula one race—all while the Rolling Stones belt out “Sympathy for the Devil” on the soundtrack.

As his fantasy fades, he looks out the window at the billboard again, just as the workmen finish rolling the ad into place, revealing the very “affordable” price of \$29,900.

“No thanks; I think I can handle this one,” he says to the Devil, who glares angrily and vanishes in a puff of black smoke.

I love this ad for several reasons, not merely because it shares its subject matter with today’s Gospel lesson about the temptation of Jesus. And not because of the delightful irony of seeing Willem Dafoe play the Devil—since this means he has now acted on both ends of the Christian spectrum, having played Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I also like this ad because it offers us an opportunity to take a hard look at our culture of scarcity and insecurity and to consider some of the temptations we struggle with as we move into the season of Lent.

Our gospel reading from Luke today is one of the episodes recalling the temptation of Jesus that is traditionally read on the first Sunday in Lent. It’s read partly as an introduction to the practices of contemplation and fasting, which makes up traditional Lenten practice, and it also is the event that is the immediate prelude to Jesus’s public ministry.

In order to fully understand what’s going on in this passage I think it’s important to recall what happened immediately beforehand. At the very end of Chapter Three, Luke tells us the story of Jesus’s baptism, of his coming up out of the water, of the Holy Spirit descending upon him, and of the voice that says, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” For Luke, a key component of the baptism of Jesus is that it declares Jesus’s identity as the Son of

God. Jesus has just claimed this identity publicly and is preparing to go forth into the world to engage in his ministry of teaching and healing.

Notice also that the temptation for Jesus in this passage is not necessarily to do evil things. The first test is to turn a stone into bread. This would assuage his hunger after a long fast, but by implication, he could turn all the stones in the wilderness into bread and create ample food for many, many hungry people. The second test is to rule the world—something Jesus could easily turn to his advantage and holy purpose, reigning over the world with justice and mercy. The third test is to test God’s authority and power in Jesus’s own life, to see if God’s promise to God’s people is real.

At the heart of these temptations is a suggestion that God is not trustworthy. The tempter taunts Jesus with, “If you are the Son of God,” as if to call into question Jesus’s relationship to God. The temptations that the Devil offers suggest that Jesus could and should establish himself on his own terms, that he could and should be self-sufficient and known apart from his Creator. But Jesus resists this temptation to define himself apart from God and instead is content to understand who he is in relation to whose he is.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher, spoke of the condition of being human as having an emptiness within us, a longing that can only be filled by our relationship with God. Pascal said, “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in humanity a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This we try in vain to fill with everything around us, [...] since this infinite abyss can be filled only [...] by God alone.”

People have come to call this emptiness a “God-shaped hole,” or a “God-shaped vacuum.” Pascal did not necessarily see this emptiness as a flaw, however, but rather as the means God uses to keep us connected in life-giving relationship. Many philosophers and theologians and poets over the centuries have spoken of this God-shaped vacuum, naming it in slightly different ways. In the fourth century, St. Augustine wrote in the first few lines of his work *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.” The seventeenth-century Welsh poet George Herbert described this same restlessness as the “pulley” by which God draws us back to God. And the twentieth-century process theologians refer to this same concept as a “lure” that constantly calls us into relationship with God.

This Gospel passage urges us to ask: how do we define ourselves? How are we tempted to define ourselves as apart from God? What things present themselves as perfectly formed to fill our own God-shaped vacuum? Unfortunately, I think our postmodern consumer culture offers ample opportunities – daily, in fact—to seek our identity in things that are not God.

A few years ago the PBS documentary series *Frontline* produced an episode about the evolution of the modern advertising industry called *The Persuaders*. The film noted that in the past, advertisers used to highlight the quality of the products: our detergent makes clothes whiter; our coffee tastes richer. Then, they moved into seeking celebrity endorsements: Who remembers Orson Welles saying, “We will sell no wine before its time”? Today, however, advertisements don’t necessarily promise a great product; instead, they promise an imagined lifestyle that the product will provide if we buy it. Think about the Mercedes ad I cited a few moments ago. The

Devil promises the young man the car, “and everything that goes along with it.” The experts call this pseudo-spiritual marketing and emotional branding. The object of emotional branding, says filmmaker Douglas Rushkoff, is “to fill the empty places where non-commercial institutions like schools and churches might have once done the job. Brands become more than just a mark of quality. They become an invitation to a longed-for lifestyle, a ready-made identity.”

At first glance, the idea of emotional branding sounds ridiculous; how can owning a particular brand of car or laptop or athletic shoes enhance your sense of self-worth? But the reality is that emotional branding works, especially in a culture of scarcity, a culture that tells us every day that we are not enough just as we are. These products hold out the seductive hope that the story they tell is true—that by owning them, we will feel less alone, less incomplete, more whole, that we will belong, and that the emptiness inside will finally be filled.

As journalist Naomi Klein says, “When you listen to brand managers talk, you can get quite carried away in this idea that they actually are filling these needs that we have for community and narrative and transcendence, but in the end it is just a laptop and a pair of running shoes, and they might be great, but they aren’t actually going to fill those needs.”

Now, I’m not necessarily suggesting that owning stuff is in and of itself bad. Nor is desiring a particular brand of product a bad thing. The temptation, though, is when that stuff becomes the way we make meaning in our lives—when stuff becomes the way we fill that God-shaped vacuum we all carry.

Society tells us we will be complete when we fill the emptiness with a luxury car, or the latest smart phone, or a pair of expensive sneakers. Society tells us we will feel complete if we look like Kate Upton or if we have talent like Usher or if we aspire to be on the cover of a celebrity magazine. And so we try to fill that emptiness with whatever we can, with food or alcohol or a new car or a new wardrobe or more and more stuff. And it is never enough, because none of it is the one thing we’re really longing for. And none of it will ever satisfy our need to know that we are enough, just as we are; we are worthy just as we were made.

In his resistance to his own temptation, Jesus shows us the key to resisting our temptation—by finding our identity in our relationship with God. Just as Jesus’s baptism conferred on him his essential identity, so our baptism confers on us our identity as the beloved children of God. If we remember that identity, we may be less likely to succumb to the various pressures that tempt us to define ourselves in terms of what we have. We may be less likely to fill that God-shaped vacuum with everything that is not God.

This is the good news, my friends. We already have a ready-made identity; we are baptized children of God, beloved of the Holy One, made in God’s image, already worthy and enough, just as we are. We do not need to listen to siren song of scarcity from our society; we do not need to buy or do anything to be worthy. We only need to claim that identity and fill the God-shaped vacuum inside us with nothing but God. Thanks be to God. Amen.