

Lent 1C 2025
Luke 4:1-13
The Rev. Dr. Kathy Kelly

I'm glad to be back from my scholarship retreat in New Zealand and I am grateful for your support and for holding down the fort in my absence. Thanks especially to our worship leaders and lay preachers for leading Sunday mornings last month. It sounds like that went well.

The funny thing about a full month living like a hermit is that new awarenesses can come to mind.

My first week at the retreat center, I couldn't stop thinking about an old image of Jesus in the wilderness. I don't know why it came to mind. There was a print of this painting in my office in Virginia a few years back.

For some reason, I couldn't quit thinking of it. I finally looked up the image to see who the artist was. Then, more than a week later, Thomas sent me a draft of the bulletin for today and he had chosen the very same painting for the cover. It is in your hand right now.

I was a bit bowled over with the serendipity of that. It is an image of the gospel reading for today. And it is an image of isolation and suffering. I guess I engaged this famous painting from my own place of isolation. And it took getting really quiet and listening to the Holy Spirit for me to notice.

As we enter more fully into our lenten journey for this year, I want to invite you to consider perspective.

It's the latest on social media, whenever anyone posts comments about pictures or stories they are sharing they often will use the acronym, POV which stands for point of view. It's the perspective of the camera.

When I look at this image of the messiah worn and famished, just sitting on a rock in the desert waiting, waiting for what, I'm not sure. But when I really engage the image, I imagine watching him. And waiting too on his next move.

Maybe because it is a painting, but I just want to observe.

But my meditations on this image while on my retreat led me to consider a new point of view. I imagined myself entering into the scene and sitting beside him instead of across from him just observing him.

This made a big difference. The point of the story of the temptation of Jesus shifted. I was able to more deeply empathize with his suffering. I was even able to more clearly imagine a forty day fast. And being filled with the Spirit. And then my POV changed further into imagining following him into ministry from this place.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the loss of conversation in our age. In the thirty years since we all brought the internet into our homes and devices, we have lost the art of conversation. Most people alive today have difficulty with social conversations in two ways: Either they have difficulty listening to others and/or they have difficulty in expressing themselves in a way which is interesting and relatable.

Sociologists and psychologists say this is in part because we are all on our screens too much. We are getting constant, instant gratification from our scrolling and we are not really talking to and certainly not listening to each other anymore.

In an introductory chapter of the book, *The Art of Conversation*, Catherine Blyth says this: "The irony of this communication age is that we communicate less meaningfully." She went on to say that:

When it works, conversation can come close to heaven. Be it sharing a laugh with a stranger, transforming a contact into a friend; that joyful moment when you share a joke, or spark a new idea; or just letting off steam with someone who knows how to listen. . . . Some writers have argued that conversation is where the raw stuff of life is spun into art.

This quote comes from a chapter cleverly titled: "We Need To Talk". She points out that whenever we use that phrase, "we need to talk" we have come to

expect the worst. “We need to talk” has come to mean the end of the conversation. “We need to talk” is usually used to set up for a break up or a job termination, or a fight. So, we don’t really like that phrase.

But we do need to talk. And we do need to talk in more gentle, caring and listening ways. Should a friend give me a nudge if I am talking too much or not listening well? Do I need to talk a little less? Do I need to work on my listening skills? Do you think any of these questions might apply to you?

Maybe not. Maybe we do just fine in this parish in the way that we listen to each other. But consider another, more important question. Are we working to better listen to the Holy Spirit in our lives? Are we listening to Jesus?

As I tried to better my spiritual listening this past month, I ran across this painting and this TV character and this book chapter and I noticed the serendipity. Then I wondered how I might apply this to our readings for this First Sunday of Lent.

It is when I listened for God’s nudge that I noticed, for the first time, something new about this passage of scripture which I thought I knew so well. Jesus is having a conversation with the devil. Wait, what?!

I think I would have just ignored the devil if I’d run into him in the wilderness. That’s what I do, or try to do, whenever I encounter what I perceive to be evil. I just go about my business and try not to engage. I suppose that is my answer to managing temptation too. Just ignore it and it will go away.

Well, maybe not.

While we are spending hours alone every day disengaged in our scrolling, Jesus models for us engagement. He engages John the Baptist, he engages all of his followers and as soon as he is baptized, Jesus goes into the wilderness and engages Satan himself.

The story of the temptation of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry has many perspectives through which we have studied it. We can emphasize the miracle of his strength and endurance through fasting and surviving in the desert or the wilderness for forty days and nights. Or you may remember digging through the quotes he uses from the Hebrew Bible, those Jewish laws we New Testament Christians tend to ignore. Or maybe you've heard an interpretation that the story is about overcoming the temptations in our lives. All of these perspectives on the fourth chapter of Luke are certainly worth considering.

But I see a conversation.

Jesus conversed with the evil one.

In all of what follows in the biblical account of Jesus, through his teaching and preaching and healing and leading his followers to the Gospel of love, Jesus engages people.

He engages the temple teachers at the age of 12 (Lk 2: 41ff).

He engages the people he heals.

He engages the disciples he calls.

He engages the crowds and the tax collectors and the Pharisees and the scribes and the woman at the well and the lepers and Judas and Pilate.

Jesus engages everyone he encounters for the rest of the story. And he continues to engage us too - if we will listen.

And in this story about the first thing he did after his baptism and just before he began his ministry, he engaged the devil.

And he listened to the devil.

And his responses to the devil's temptations did not come just because the devil stopped talking and it was Jesus' turn to talk. Jesus' responses were all direct quotes of scripture.

Jesus listens to those whom he heals and calls and loves and that's no surprise. But in this story, he even listens to the devil have his say. And if you think about it, that makes sense. How else can he know the best response?

I don't think the take home message here is to weaponize ourselves with chapter-and-verse quotes like many Christians do, then head out into the world ready to conquer evil.

Rather, I think we ought to study the model of listening Jesus gives us. He listens to the nay sayers and responds with truth in the same way that he listens to those who plead for healing, cry out for mercy and ask over and over again, why, and how, and when. And he went off to pray often in order to do his own spirit listening.

My point is not to judge you for those times you interrupt in order to talk or dismiss someone else in order to get your point across or walk away with your hand up. We all have opinions. We all want to feel heard. Your voice, what you have to say is valuable. Having your say is important.

But listening is more important. We may disagree, we may find the opinion of the other implausible. We may need to set some boundaries, to say no to evil, to speak the truth in love. But we can do none of that without listening first. F

Most importantly, we have to remember that all of this happened because Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. In Luke (and its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles), the Spirit fills people and leads them into trials, uncertainties, and wildernesses. But always they are filled with the Spirit as they went, led by the Spirit because they listened to the Spirit.

So, my friends, especially during lent, we need to work on listening to the Holy Spirit. In this way we too can get filled up and led on the right Way. Then listening better to each other will come more easily.

Amen.