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Different (Lead On!) – Mt 4:1-11; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Romans 12:2 (3)

Last week, we looked at the precious core of faith and call by God, and how we've done a less-than-stellar job of convincing others – perhaps even ourselves – of its value. In Lent, this time of reflection and recommitment, let's look at why this precious core of faith is important: *it makes us different.*

It's important to view Jesus's forty days in the wilderness – with its ties to the Exodus of Israel and our Lent - coupled with Jesus's baptism, which occurs just before today's passage in Matthew.

Jesus's baptism and temptation, taken together, are a turning point for Jesus. They're often referred to as the start of Jesus's public ministry, since we know nothing in Scripture about his life from age twelve to here. They may be something more: they may show how Jesus learned fully who he was.

We're told that as Jesus came to be baptized by John the Baptist, he had at least some knowledge of his special nature – he is drawn to seek out John. John, of course, knows who Jesus is. He even tries to avoid baptizing him, since Jesus is, after all, his Lord as well.

But when John baptizes him, we understand why it was so important for Jesus: Heaven opens up, the Spirit of God comes down on him, and the voice of God says: “This is my Son, whom I dearly love...”

Now, certainly, Jesus knows he’s different – very different – from the rest of humanity. But having had a mostly ordinary childhood, as far as we know, this, his baptism, is the first adult insight into just how special he is: God’s son.

Then, that same Spirit of God that came down on him at his baptism draws him out into the wilderness, where over forty days of fasting and temptation, his different nature becomes even clearer to him.

Being different is not just something Jesus had to understand, it’s something most of us do, too. Funny, it’s this innate striving to set ourselves apart, what pioneering psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called “differentiation,” that pops up in so many ways in our lives. And, so often it contradicts itself.

When I was in High School, I was different, just like everybody else. I wore cowboy boots and an old fatigue jacket, long hair and flannel shirts... just like all my friends. Meanwhile, those who were different from us were busy being different - just like their friends. Amazing, isn’t it, how people manage to be the same when they’re being different? Advertising loves this: come join us, buy this, and be different! It’s a very human quandary – we want to be different, but

different like others. It's the rare person indeed who truly charts their own, unique path.

So, the real question is, different from what? Your parents? Siblings? Most people who try to make a statement by being different still manage to emulate others, so you end up with a whole bunch of folks trying to be different in similar ways.

Yet, one of the truths of our faith is that while we are alike in every important way: all sinners, all humans, all creatures created by God, all called to Christ – whether we answer that call or not - each of us is unique. Each of us is hand-crafted by God, who loves us as if there were only one of us.

It's when we answer Christ's call, the tug of the Spirit, that we realize that while we are all the same, once we become people of faith, children of God, we become different.

This is something that God's been trying to get across since creation. Once we accept God's rule, once we wake up, once we are new creatures in Christ, we are different, we are made different: we are made holy.

Diane gave a wonderful message at The Source the week before last, using – of all things – a text from Leviticus, the often-ignored book of instructions from God to his newly-rescued people, all about one thing: how they were to be different, how to be God's holy people.

They were not to marry outside their people. They were not to mix two kinds of fiber in the fabric of their garments. The men were to be circumcised, they weren't to eat certain foods – all these, and many more things, which had one point: *you, Israel, are to be my holy people, different from the rest of humankind*. And in case they didn't get it, many of these same rules are repeated in Deuteronomy (“second law”) – the book Jesus quotes back at Satan as he overcomes each of the devil's three temptations.

Back to the Jesus's temptation in the wilderness: the Devil is tenacious – doesn't give up easily, though hasn't won, and never will. Here he tries three times, after Jesus has already been there forty days, to get him to be like any ordinary human being.

Jesus is ravenously hungry, and he has the power to make bread from stone. I'm pretty sure I would; Jesus doesn't. He's given a chance to fly, knowing he's safe because of who he is; I'm not comfy with heights, but if I knew for sure that it was safe, I think I just might try it. Tried to go to Airborne school, after all. Offered the whole world? For a few words? Pretty tempting... the plot of countless movies and books and stories... World Domination! Unless you know it's already yours. Jesus does. And now both he and we know that he's not like anyone else who ever was, or ever will be: he is the son of God, and he has a mission to perform, a service to render us ordinary human beings.

It's this service he renders, his sacrifice, which only he could do because he is different, that makes us different.

Back to Israel. Naturally, the people didn't keep the rules. That's the story of the most of the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. But God still sought for them to be different, and that's where his visit as a human being among us in Jesus – Emmanuel, remember, God-with-us, comes in, as the next step in God's plan to craft a people that are different.

For the people of Israel, being different meant being *apart from* the rest of humanity. But God has a way of *including*, reaching out to those who remain on the other side of that line of difference; and in Christ, that difference, itself, changed its nature. It became about the Spirit, rather than the physical. Listen to what Peter has to say about this difference: “For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people [been called to be different] so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

God's line of inclusion has expanded, and it now includes even us, who weren't literally, physically descended from Abraham.

So, last week's sermon asked you to think about how each of us might communicate our precious faith in such a way that others would

find it precious, too. Part of this is that we ARE different. God called the Israelites to be set apart, different, and that's a lot of what the Law was all about. But if, as many theologians think, God is in fact drawing us forward – a reasonable idea, given the way that Christ re-embodied and fulfilled the Law – that we are still being pulled forward today, called to be different even from what we have come to be as Christians today. Led to understand God in new ways; led by the Spirit.

For example, the Israelites were different, but they were also ordered to be mindful of and care for those who were not set apart. Christ was different, and reminded – or discovered – his set-apartness in the temptation, that his mission is not about himself, his human wants and needs, but God's story of salvation. And us? We are different: called and set apart to something special. You may not feel it; but in the trials of life in faith (as Dorothy Reid, the leader of the Gospel group that came down from Southside Presbyterian Church put it in song: "Going Up the Rough Side of the Mountain" – singing and playing her heart out in a wheel chair and on oxygen), in those tough times and temptations, you may find what it is that is so precious, yet so hard to describe, and learn new ways to say it. That our faith in Christ can help us see these trials in a different way is part of the path.

Here's the point: As believers, we're different. But being different isn't just for the sake of being different: it has two key properties. One, we are different because we are called into the light, given salvation; and

two, because we are called to witness to the One who called us out into the light, who made us different, who is, himself, different.

Paul tells us this, too: “Don’t be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is – what is good and pleasing and mature.” (Rm 12:2)

So that is what we’re supposed to do. Be different. Resist temptation to make everything about you. A lot like what we tell or told our kids – “Just because so-and-so does it doesn’t mean you have to... If they jumped off a cliff, would you, too?”

Jesus didn’t jump off the temple. But he lived in the world to which he came, mixing with everyone, talking to anyone, healing, in the end, everyone – but without conforming, without buying into or being bent down and broken by the subtle temptations that the world has to offer. Sure, he got angry, but he didn’t become an angry man; he allowed others to treat him luxuriously, but he didn’t become a slave to comfort; he ate and drank with sinners, but didn’t become one himself.

I struggle with not paying back evil for evil, being angry with those who are angry at me; I struggle with finding the right path; I struggle to treat others as I’d like to be treated. It’s not easy, being different – but it’s our call.,

The Spirit of God led Jesus out into the wilderness. We’re already there, but the Spirit is with us, too: and while we may feel the need to

sneak into the shadows to avoid the brightness of the light that God gives us to examine ourselves, we have been “called out of darkness into [God’s] amazing life” to be different. The same kind of different: discipleship different. The Spirit will lead us, too – not into the wilderness, rather out of it. Lead on!