

NEAR TO GOD

March 10, 2019

Lent 1

[Romans 10:8b-13](#)

[Luke 4:1-13](#)

(prayer)

All three of the [synoptic gospels](#) (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) follow up the account of Jesus' baptism with a narrative about Jesus spending time alone in the wilderness. Mark (the first gospel to be written) summarizes that time in two short verses (Mk1:12-13).

The Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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Matthew and Luke draw on a tradition that included [more details](#) of the wilderness temptation of Jesus. Fasting and alone for forty days, Jesus encounters the accuser *or temptor* (Sâtan in Hebrew; δῖάβολος Diábolos in Greek). In the old testament tradition, the Sâtan is a prosecutor of sorts who accuses the nation of Judah in the heavenly court. Famously, in the story of Job, this accuser is an entity that challenges God on the issue of the impact of suffering on a person's faithfulness. The Sâtan wagers with God that, if Job's prosperous and happy life is upended, his unwavering devotion would waver. God won that bet.

By Jesus' time, within the Pharisaic tradition, Satan had evolved into a near-God entity who malevolently tempted people into sin (i.e. remaining faithful to God's expectations as defined within the Torah).

We see that theology *very clearly* in the Luke and Matthew versions of the temptation narrative.

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As we heard today, Jesus is tempted in the desert in three distinct ways:

1. Jesus is tempted to abate his hunger by miraculously turning stones into bread.
2. Jesus is tempted with total political power and authority.
3. Jesus is tempted with celebrity and popularity born out of entertaining feats of wonder.

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Each of these temptations appeal to Jesus' potential selfishness, his vanity, and his desire to shortcut the ministry and mission laying before him.

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These specific temptations are interesting microcosms of how the world's Empires obtain and maintain power:

1. Empires control how goods (including agricultural products) are traded, who gets access to what and who profits. Empires have always treated the goods produced by the people of the lands they control as their own assets rather than belonging to the producers. And... empires have long kept the populous focusing on daily bread as a means of stemming of revolutions.
2. Empires - by definition (and etymology) - are imperialistic. They desire perpetual growth and gaining greater influence over more and more lands.
3. Finally, Empires have used dramatic shows of power as a means to influence the actions of the people. Empires use examples and threats of power to keep the peace - to maintain security.

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In a way, Jesus is tempted with the tools of Rome: control the food chain, dominate the world

politically, and keep yourself safe by acts of awesome power.

As much as Jesus' wilderness time was a struggle with the impact of earthly power, it also had a spiritual dimension.

Matthew's gospel records John the Baptist preaching that *the Kingdom of Heaven has come near*. This is, both, a religious *and* political proclamation: God is the true sovereign of the people; God is the real Caesar of the world (as opposed to Tiberius of Rome).

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True to reputation, Satan tells Jesus that he doesn't need God... Jesus can take control of things himself. *You don't need the Spirit to buoy you up. Forget the Torah. Set your own rules. Be your own emperor on your own terms.*

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And so, it makes sense that Jesus counters each temptation with scriptural claims that express *trusting in the ways of God*. We can hear this as Jesus *rejecting the ways of Empire*.

Jesus sets aside the temptations by committing to remain tied to God.

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When we read on in Luke, Jesus comes out of the wilderness and takes up the old prophetic call *to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives; to open the eyes of the blind and to free the oppressed*.

As a result of his forty days in the wilderness, the ministry of Jesus will not focus on Jesus acquiring of power, but the empowerment of the vulnerable.

The mission of Jesus will centre on a removal of barriers between people rather than exploiting divisions for selfish gain.

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This is a theme that we read in Paul's letter to the Romans when he wrote that *there is no distinction between Jew and Greek*.

One of the issues in several early churches was how to integrate those (attracted to the good news of Jesus) who did not come from the same faith tradition of Jesus and his first disciples. Paul - in fact - saw it as his primary mission to make the gospel known to the greek-speaking, gentile world.

In other places, Paul would broaden this basic message to remove assumed barriers based on genre (*there is no male or female*), social status (*there is no slave or free*) and even attitudes of religious superiority and judgmental piety (*never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another*).

Peter would come to the same conclusion (as we can read in [Acts 10](#)) that God does not show partiality.

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These early church leaders built on barrier-ignoring nature of the life of Jesus.

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When we are only concerned about ourselves, the health and happiness of others (especially those we don't know) is a barrier to our own accomplishments.

But when we view ourselves as part of something grander (as a consequence of our belief that God is our companion on the way), *our* health and happiness are tied to the health & happiness of others.

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This appears to be an insight that Jesus held to as he came out of the wilderness.

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Jesus - although isolated in a desolate place - drew strength from the belief that he was not alone. The Mark and Matthew versions of the story describe this by saying that after the time of temptation that *angels waited on Jesus*.

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This season of Lent can be a time for the followers of Jesus to rediscover the reality of a holy presence in our time as well... a time to reconnect with our God.

Some people find it helpful to develop a discipline of some kind during these five weeks: giving up a personal vice (even if only temporarily); participating in tangible acts of service; making time for focused prayer or study; committing to self-exploration and self-discovery with a view of becoming more of who we can better be.

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Like Jesus, when we attempt these disciplines, we might find ourselves facing temptations to avoid the hard work.

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It is human nature, it seems, to take the road *most* traveled: to avoid uncertainty, to seek the safety of the familiar, to avoid the unknown, to stay on the well-lit path.

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Well, Jesus is the light of the world.

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As we accept that we have our God as a companion, we have a light to our path. With light, even a less-traveled road seems more comfortable.

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A gift of Lent (for those of us in the north) is that we are facing our own demons in a time and place where *new life is emerging*... or more accurately, *dormant life is re-emerging*. As we move along this path towards Easter, light is becoming more abundant - mystery is being revealed and we are presented with time to discover more and more.

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Let the longer days that are emerging around us be a reminder that the light of God brings a comfort to the uncomfortable, safety to the vulnerable, and a welcome to those on the edge.

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Let us pray:

Journey with us, God through this day, through this Lenten season. May we follow your lead and draw strength from your presence. Amen.

#115VU "Jesus Tempted in the Desert"