

Temptation

Luke 4:1-13

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Some people say that pastors should always preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. That is, every Sunday we should preach about current events, interpreted through the lens of scripture. I don't usually do that. If you have heard me preach very much, you know that I almost always preach about scripture, and I interpret it through the lens of my own personal stories, or those of my family. If there are dots to be connected to current events, I figure that you are all bright enough and aware enough to trace that line yourselves. Today is different. Today I am going to connect the dots from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness to this year's election. Don't worry. I won't endorse – or even mention – any candidates or political parties. This is a theological conversation, and an urgent one.

So, let's set the scene: Jesus and a whole crowd of people have just been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. It is a time of repentance and washing clean. And the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven like a dove, and a voice from heaven says, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." Wow! What an experience that must have been, not just for Jesus, but for all the people there at the river!

Then, the Gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus is still full of the Holy Spirit and he heads out into the wilderness, where he fasts for 40 days, eating nothing at all. Have any of you ever fasted? I would probably make it about a day and a half. At the end of the 40 days, Jesus is physically and mentally and spiritually drained. He is surely light headed. Certainly, he is weak. And – naturally – that is when the devil shows up, when Jesus' earthly body is at its lowest point, when he has the fewest human resources to draw upon.

And the devil says, "You're hungry – starving. If you are really the Son of God, command these stones to turn into loaves of bread." And Jesus responds according to scripture, with a fortitude I certainly could not have mustered, "Man does not live by bread alone."

So, the devil takes Jesus up the mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the earth. And the devil says, "I will give you earthly political power – authority over all the nations of the earth – if you will just worship me. You can have not just AN earthly kingdom, but all of them. You can be the ruler of the world. Just worship me." And Jesus responds, quoting scripture again, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Frustrated in his first two attempts, the devil takes Jesus to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here and call on the angels to catch you and protect you." Jesus responds, quoting scripture once more, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus has entered the wilderness full of the Holy Spirit. He leaves the wilderness with clarity about his purpose – his heavenly purpose – for his earthly life. He has resisted every temptation to use his heavenly power for earthly power, and so his ministry can begin. And he goes immediately to Galilee and begins to preach. In his first recorded sermon, Jesus quotes Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [The year of the Lord's favor is the jubilee, when all debts are cancelled and debt slaves are freed.]

We have to understand all three of these scenes together to get their full meaning. First the baptism, the blessing, the declaration of God's love. Then the temptation, when Jesus finds the strength to resist the offer of earthly power in place of heavenly power. Everything earthly is stripped away, so that he can declare the holy purpose of his ministry – to serve God's children who are poor, blind, oppressed, captive, and indebted. Jesus could have claimed earthly authority. He could have given orders and they would have been obeyed. But he knew that he was standing on holy ground. His calling was not to be in authority. It was to resist earthly power on behalf of people who get the short end of every single stick.

I chose this passage today because we have an important national election coming up, in which we are challenged to distinguish between our heavenly purpose as Christians and our civic responsibilities as voters. Our values tie the two together. Our values are shaped not only by our faith but also by our education and our parenting and our personal experiences, and our values should inform our vote. In fact, it would be impossible for us to exclude our values, including our Christian values, from the electoral choices we make, because our values are part of who we are. But – as Christians – we need to be just as clear as Jesus was that our ultimate calling is not to earthly political power. We stand on holy ground, too. Jesus rejected political power in favor of healing and feeding and setting free.

Unfortunately, right now there is a religious/political movement called Christian Nationalism (or more accurately White Christian Nationalism) whose explicit purpose is to claim earthly power, political power, on behalf of a narrow segment of Christianity. There are different definitions of Christian Nationalism. I use the one provided by the Public Religion Research Institute: They define Christian Nationalism by these five beliefs:

- The US government should declare America to be a Christian nation.
- US laws should be based on [their understanding of] Christian values.
- If the US moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.
- Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.
- God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Importantly, Christian Nationalists claim their own beliefs, their own version of Christianity, as the only beliefs that are Christian. They probably wouldn't count me as a Christian, because I disagree with many of their tenets of faith.

Now, I spent a couple of Sundays this past summer answering questions about how we should relate to people with whom we disagree politically, or whose faith is different from ours. Mostly, my answer was "Just don't engage on those issues. Try to know and care about these people as whole people, who love their grandchildren and who make delicious pies and who also have knees that ache when the weather changes, just like we do." And I think that is still good advice for dealing with the people in our lives in a divided society. This morning, however, I am focusing not on the individual people in our lives, but on the ideology of White Christian Nationalism and the explicit, politically organized efforts this year to use the election to impose their particular brand of Christianity not only on us but also on people of other faiths, or no faith – to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

We should recognize that our own language around Christ's power can be ambiguous. We sang this morning, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name": "Let every kindred, every tribe on this terrestrial ball to him all majesty ascribe, and crown him Lord of all." But we should not be confused. That crown is a heavenly crown, not an earthly one. Jesus was not the least bit confused about this. He could have claimed earthly authority when the devil offered it to him. He could have given orders and they would have been obeyed. But he knew he stood on holy ground. His calling was not to exercise earthly dominion over others. It was to resist earthly power on behalf of people who get the short end of every stick. His calling was to heal, to feed, to set free.

We, too, are standing on holy ground. Our calling is the same as his. And we should be wary of those who want to look out over all the land and claim political power on behalf of a single faith, even if it is our faith, even if they offer that power to us. We should not be tempted by that claim. It is a temptation in the wilderness, and we know who the tempter is. Let us stand firm on holy ground.

Amen