

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. William McCoy  
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Luke 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

**An Opportune Time**

Drama! Not on-the-high-seas drama, but in the desert south of Jericho. No speedy, jacked-up, all-terrain vehicles, driven by muscular warriors, armed to the teeth for combat with enemy forces, but a lone man, Jesus of Nazareth, confronted by the likes of "Lucifer." (I'll go with the title Mick Jagger and Keith Richards chose in their song, "Sympathy for the Devil—'cause I believe in some restraint.") Call it what you will, there was something ominous, out there in the wilderness, something harsh, something malevolent and seductive. Years ago I met a wise man, a patient in the cardiac care unit of what was then City Hospital, who declared to me, "The Devil's a busy man." It was merely his way of saying evil is always afoot in the world, and it comes in many guises. Presumably Jesus knew that better than most and somehow managed to escape it in this dramatic encounter we hear about the first Sunday of Lent--or he did at least until, as Luke puts it, "an opportune time."

I tend to think of the wilderness as a place in northern Ontario, where we spend a week or two every summer: glacially formed rocks and sky-blue waters; endless forests of evergreen trees; stars, splayed out across the nighttime sky; and silence, interrupted by the occasional calls of loons. "In wilderness is the preservation of the world," a poster says, in a cabin built up there over a hundred years ago. For many the wilderness is anything but beautiful, a place you have to drive through or fly over to get somewhere "civilized." Beautiful or desolate, in the Bible the wilderness is a place where faith is formed. Moses spends time in the wilderness of Sinai before heading back to Egypt, where he leads his people out of slavery. For 40 years they wander, preferring the familiarity of hardship and captivity to the wilderness, before they finally reach the land

they believe was promised to them. The prophecies of Elijah and John the Baptist take shape in the wilderness. And here in Luke it's a place "where for forty days (Jesus) was tempted by the devil." The Jordan River feeds into the Dead Sea, there. You can see for miles in every direction, and for the most part it's pretty drab. Just rocks and hills and brush. Scorpions are common in that wilderness. The wind blows hard, relentless, at times, and, like northern Ontario, there's the silence...

The wilderness is a place for letting go, for recognizing that control is elusive, at best. One night I was paddling a canoe over water like glass and wound up at that same cabin, where I sat on a porch swing and reflected on my life. Just before midnight the wind came up, and on my return trip I couldn't paddle the canoe around the tip of an island, the waves were so strong. I managed to get to shore and had to wade in the shallows, pulling the canoe until I cleared the point and had the wind at my back and could make it back home. In the desert, sandstorms bring all activity to a halt, for all of their ferocity. The way I see it, Jesus was tempted by power and control out there. "If you are the Son of God," speaks a voice that breaks the silence, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Maybe it was within his power. Maybe by some strange alchemy he could manipulate the molecules of that hard rock and shape a loaf of bread from it. In John's gospel he turns water into wine, after all (2: 1-11). Later in Luke's gospel (see also Matthew and Mark) he calms the wind and the waves of a storm on the Sea of Galilee (8: 22-25), he feeds the masses with nothing but five loaves and two fish (9: 12-17; also, Matthew and Mark). Take control, Son of God! And why not? What's wrong with feeding the hungry? Not a blessed thing, of course; but something else, something cursed is at play in that wilderness "conversation." Jesus is tempted to take control and wield a power that would render him miraculous in the eyes of many; but would it do no more than this? Is that where his mission is to end?

I've kept a cartoon on my desk for months, and at the risk of levity during this Lenten season, which traditionally has been a solemn occasion on the church calendar, I'll share it with you. It shows a group of robed and hooded invaders, high above a peaceful village where children play by a stream and a man is fishing nearby. One of the invaders speaks: "We'll offer them religion in exchange for food. If that doesn't work, we'll kill them and take their food in the name of religion" (Cheney). It's that kind of power and control Jesus wrestles with, here in Luke's account of his temptations in the wilderness. It's a social temptation, what Fred Craddock calls "an offer not to fall but to rise" (Interpretation, p. 56), a quick and impressive rise to relevance, to fill an emptiness that still plagues the world today. "No self-respecting devil would approach a person with offers of personal, domestic, or social ruin," writes Craddock. "That is in the small print at the bottom of the temptation" (Ibid.). Because Jesus is in the wilderness where faith is formed, and faith in anything but almighty God ultimately gets blown away, like sand in the wind, he reads

“the small print,” here. Jesus relinquishes the power and control that might have won the day for a while but would lose the battle he came to fight to save the world.

It’s not that Jesus isn’t in control against the forces of darkness and chaos. The control he wields is different from the control, say, of an abuser in a relationship of domestic violence. An abuser wields power and exercises control by means of fear: Don’t think you can do whatever you please. I know where you are at all times. Or, how much do you love the dog? Enough to serve me dinner when and where I want it, just as I like it? Or, I’m sorry about last night. Please don’t tell anyone. Let’s just go out to breakfast. Or, do what I demand, or you’ll wind up penniless. Scary stuff, based solely on fear. It’s either my way or else. Sad to say, it’s a familiar dynamic to far too many women, and some men, as well. The power and control for which Jesus opts isn’t based on fear. It’s based on love, and it’s revolutionary, “a well-spring of care,” says Valarie Kaur, “an awakening to the inherent dignity and beauty of others and the earth, a quieting of the ego, a way of moving through the world in relationship.... Loving others, even our opponents, and in this way it has the power to sustain political, social, and moral transformation. This is how love changes the world” (from a UCC statement, written by CT, MA, and RI Conference Ministers in response to a recent vote taken by the United Methodist Church). On the front of this morning’s bulletin is a picture of the Dalai Lama. In the lower left hand corner it says, “The more you are motivated by love, the more fearless and free your actions will be.” This is the truth for which Jesus stands, beginning in the wilderness and throughout his ministry, all the way to the cross. “Fearless and free” is hardly what an abuser, advocates. Only love can accomplish that.

About a month ago I was at Roxbury Municipal Court with a woman who, for me, exemplified this beautifully. The life of her son was taken on the streets of Boston, and she had asked me to accompany her to a pre-trial hearing. When I caught up with her (to maintain her confidentiality, I’ll call her “Marie”), she was standing in the middle of a hallway outside the courtroom. Friends and family members were nearby, but Marie stood facing a woman I didn’t know whose back was to me. It turns out that woman was the mother of one of three defendants, and she wanted Marie to know that her daughter had nothing to do with the incident that killed Marie’s son. It turns out that woman was none too sympathetic to Marie’s plight, and on a previous occasion had actually threatened her. I wanted to intervene, but there was no need for this. Marie was perfectly calm, a look of benign acceptance on her face. When the woman finally walked away, we surrounded Marie with hugs and hands held and words of comfort. She assured us she was all right and then explained that had she turned a deaf ear to the woman—or, worse, walked away—there would have been a scene, more than likely a physical confrontation, shouting, at best. Instead, Marie had stood her ground, remained in control, and exhibited a strength that disarmed the woman altogether. “Nonviolence,”

says Wally Nelson, “is a courageous acceptance of active love and goodwill as the instrument with which to overcome evil and transform both oneself and others. It is the willingness to undergo suffering rather than inflict it. It excludes retaliation and flight.” Make no mistake, it’s about power and control, but a power and the control of it based on love, not fear.

But wait, as they say on those insufferable TV commercials. There’s more. Jesus is tempted to take control of “all the kingdoms of the world.” Again, the control he wields is different from the control, say, of a dictator. And again, think of what good Jesus could do in that position. We’re not talking Republican or Democrat, the mistakes of a previous administration, collusion with a foreign power, whether or not emails were properly vetted. Wouldn’t Jesus have your vote over any other candidate? Maybe. Maybe not. The oppressed of the world would rally in his behalf, but “the proud... the powerful... the rich (Luke 1: 51-53)? Not so much. Either way, it’s beside the point. Jesus isn’t running for political office. He’s not out to rule the world so much as to save it, and there’s a world of difference. “My kingdom is not of this world,” he tells Pilate (John 18: 36), in a scene that would make the most contentious Senate hearing seem tame by comparison. He said it at the beginning of “an opportune time” for evil to have the final word, when things were coming to a head, and “the devil (was) a busy man,” indeed. No can do, Jesus decides. Again, “fearless and free” is hardly what any authoritarian advocates. Only love can accomplish that.

So “the slanderer,” as he’s been called, tries another tactic. It’s for “the religious” among us—or, for those who reject traditional religion, the “spiritual.” Something awe-inspiring, something spectacular, something goose bump producing. Wow us, Jesus. Give us something convincing, when all the other claims of religion don’t cut it any more. Even better, something we can say we saw but not everybody did. It’ll make us special, an elite sect with access to the truth no one else can claim. Whadaya say? “Throw yourself down,” Jesus, from “the pinnacle of the temple,” no less. Scripture gets quoted, just to make him an offer he can’t refuse: “He will command his angels concerning you,” Jesus is told, “to protect you.... On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone” (see Psalm 91). But no, the faith of Jesus, formed out there in the Judean wilderness, has taken root in something bigger than that. Something far more grand than goose bump-producing acrobatics. Well, as we say when the Celtics lose a close one, there’s always the next game. A more opportune time?

These are Lenten themes; these are every-day, lifetime disciplines for the followers of Jesus. They make for peace wherever fear and retaliation erupt. They speak to crime, to politics, to race and terror; they offer hope and lead to the only viable solutions for the most pressing issues of our day. They’re what the church represents at its best, what the church must do in the interest of this peace—in our hearts, our community, our world.

There is no more opportune time than now to embrace them, to be empowered by them, to put them into practice. If it's thought to be naïve, then so be it. Better to think of it as trusting in something far more powerful than the means that violence has to offer. Jesus hasn't seen the last of his devilish companion from the wilderness. "An opportune time" will come again when he's put to the test, a matter of life and death and salvation itself, at Calgary. Who will prevail? How do you and I prevail when we're up against the darkness and chaos of our own lives, let alone those the world throws at us? For Jesus the struggle ends at least until the next time. He rejects "the way of flaunting miracles and... will not take up the political sword. The way of God's response to human need is otherwise. (He) leaves for Galilee but the trials are not left forever in the desert" (Craddock, *Ibid.*, p. 57). Neither are they left for someone other than the church, other than people of good character and intent, other than you and me to face in our own day. Only remember that when we place our trust in the love that triumphs over fear in the end, we need not be afraid.