**“Who is This Jesus? The Devil is in the Details”**

March 9, 2025 Text: Luke 4:1-13

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Introduction to Scripture

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus, now age thirty, has just been baptized in the river Jordan. As he rises from the waters the Holy Spirit descends upon like a dove, and a voice comes from above saying, “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” One might expect that being so pleased with Jesus, his Heavenly Father will reward him somehow, shower his beloved son with gifts, maybe send him to the Riviera of Palestine for a rest. Not so much… Reading from Luke Chapter 4 ….

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I think it is easy to get side-tracked from what Luke is about here by getting hung up on stereotypes of that which he calls the devil, or Satan. We picture a scarlet comic-book figure with a pitchfork, horns and tail, presiding over a fiery wasteland of eternal torment, someone you can tell from a mile away is just plain evil, one you just know you could never trust for a second. And so of course Jesus bests him in a match of wits. Big whoop. And so, if we can’t wrap our minds around the guy with the pitchfork, maybe we should just discard this whole passage as not possibly having anything to say to us.

Maybe some background would be helpful. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word we translate as “Satan” actually means “adversary.” Occurring in only three instances in the entire Old Testament, Satan is identified as a member of God’s heavenly court, God’s advisors. Of course God had advisors, or so the thinking went, because every king anyone knew of on earth did not rule alone, but was surrounded by courtiers whose job was to provide advice and counsel and do the king’s bidding. And the specific role of Satan was to accuse humans before God; for instance, in the book of Job, Satan tells God that Job only loves God because God has showered him with all the goodies – take those away, Satan says, and just watch what happens. Which God does, and the book of Job is off and running.

So before Satan became the personification of evil, identified as the ultimate embodiment of the powers of evil in the universe, God’s adversary, *the devil was simply the one who asked the hard questions*. This is what is going on here, I think – I think that what Luke is describing here is Jesus asking *himself* the hard questions about who he is, what his mission is, and where his allegiance lays.

Jesus is trying to get his mind on straight about who he is and what he will be about.

Now Jesus has just been given a clue, a big hint, that heavenly voice telling him “You are my Son, the Beloved.” He has had that visionary experience, great, but, really, that raises more questions than answers them. We can assume that for Jesus this was understood to mean that he stood in a special relationship with God, his Creator, but beyond that, what were the parameters, what was his model, where was the job description?

In Luke’s telling, the devil presents Jesus with three possibilities drawn from Jesus’ own religious tradition – so we might imagine that Jesus, knowing that tradition, considered these three alternatives as plausible answers to his questions about his identity.

None of the three alternatives offer what we might consider to be temptations to do something bad in the sense that they are desirable but not good for him. It is not like the temptation to eat another piece of cake at the birthday party, when you know it will ruin your diet. No, each of the three temptations are to see if Jesus will veer off the path of obedience to God’s will, if he will be true to the calling he knows in his heart and soul is his own, a path that will be very different from what is otherwise being considered.

The first test, for example, is not on its surface a temptation to do something bad. Jesus had been fasting, and is literally starving – can it be wrong to feed himself by turning a rock into a loaf of bread? It is not like there are not plenty of rocks. But if he can do that, why not just turn lots of rocks into bread, and thereby feed the starving and poor of Israel, who were always subject to famine and shortages?

And yet, if Jesus does this, if he becomes a sort of one-man Project Bread for the world, doesn’t that take the world’s people off the hook for figuring out that THEY should be the ones taking care of each other, sharing with each other, showing their love for each other by proving with their actions that there is no such thing as an unimportant or unworthy person?

Jesus responds by saying, yes, bread is good, but it is *not enough*, not enough for my people, not enough to accomplish why I am here.

The second test, the second alternative for Jesus’ identity and career path, is to rule the world. In the abstract, it seems the recipe for a megalomaniac, think, for example, of Superman’s arch-nemesis, Lex Luther. But in the time of Jesus, consider the alternative – Rome, a foreign power which had conquered and occupied Israel, ruling the land with its despotic military, industrial, and economic control. You would have been hard-pressed to find a local who thought regime change to be a bad idea. But for Jesus, the price is too high – to worship not God, but the devil, in essence to continue to play the age-old game of world domination but with just a different hand on the tiller. No thanks, that is not what I am here for.

The final option would put Jesus in the Temple, at the center of the country’s religious apparatus, the place where, presumably, the most righteous priests are in charge. But the reality, as Jesus knows, is that the Temple and its leadership, in order to hold onto their power, have worked hand in glove with the Roman occupiers, all at the expense of the poor and the common man. Go there, the temptation is, and reform that nest of vipers, that the religious leadership might be washed clean. But again, Jesus says, that is not what I am here for, not be some sort of super-Pope isolated from the rest of the world in a building on the Temple Mount. My calling is *down here*, not above the people, but *with* them – at least until such time as they lift me up and nail me to a tree.

The thing is, Jesus knows that this is what he is here for – to be true to the new, costly way of self-giving love for others. As theologian Sharon Ridge writes, “Though he refused to turn stones into bread, he does feed the hungry….Though he refused political power, the proclamation of God’s empire of justice and peace is the focus of his preaching and teaching. Though he refused to jump off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, he goes to the cross in confidence that God’s will for life will trump the world’s decision to execute him.”

Why does any of this matter? It matters because we are always trying to make Jesus into our own image , to fit him into our ideas of what a Savior should look like and do.

A divine Savior who we have placed out of our world in some sort of lofty place where he can have nothing to do with us or the decisions we face each day;

a cosmic Superman who we can count on to do all the heavy lifting of making the world a better place while we go about pursuing our own agendas;

a victorious ruler who issues orders to keep other folk in line, and who we can use to justify policies and practices which would be abhorrent to the one who ate with sinners, embraced the poor and the foreigner, and was identified as the Prince of Peace.

Jesus rejected all of these tempting alternatives. Should his followers do no less?

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