

## **Lent 1, Love is Stronger than Hate**

We have been going through a very stressful time for well over two years now—here and around the globe—and it just got more difficult in the past several weeks. The war with the virus seems finally to be letting up, but now Russia's—or should I say Putin's—attack on Ukraine has darkened our horizon with the black clouds of war. The terrifying headlines about the virus have been replaced by even more terrifying headlines about tanks and bombs and cities blown to bits. It's a war that could easily escalate into a multinational conflict, or even a world war, even a nuclear war. I don't know if you're stressed out about this, but I know I am. The internet gives us front row seats in this rolling disaster. It's easy to get caught up in obsessive doom scrolling. Over two years fighting a deadly virus and now an escalating war. It's overwhelming. Can't we catch a break? God help us! Yes indeed, God help us.

To be honest, I have been struggling to hear a word from God in the readings assigned for today. Mostly I have been pondering the temptation story because the themes resonate with our time: isolation in the wilderness, hunger, temptation, and the looming presence of the prince of darkness, the Devil. Whether or not you believe the Devil is a real being, I think we can all agree that evil is real. So take the Devil as real being or as a symbol, as you like. I tend toward the latter view, most days.

How do we relate to the temptation of Jesus? What do we learn from it? It's such an extreme story, so outside of our usual experience: Jesus is in the wilderness, eating nothing for 40 days. The Devil tempts him, not just on day 40, but throughout Jesus' wilderness sojourn. But at the end the temptation becomes focused. The Devil says: misuse your miraculous power; worship me and rule every nation; prove you are the Son of God before the multitude by diving from the temple. Well, these are not temptations that you or I have had, at least I haven't. These are not the run of the mill sort of temptations most of us face. Our temptations seem like small change by contrast: cheating on our taxes, lying to our partner or neighbor, stealing a few bucks out of Dad's wallet, tearing the tags off a mattress. But Jesus' temptations are big stuff! So how do we approach this extreme and unique story? What does it mean... for us? And how are we to respond to it?

Context is important. In the story just preceding the temptation, Jesus went to the Jordan to be baptized by John. John was announcing the soon arrival of God's kingdom and of the Messiah who would rule the nations. When Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us that "the heaven was opened, and the Spirit of God descended upon him. And a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words echo Psalm 2, a Psalm written to celebrate David's role as God's chosen Messiah. Coming up out of the water, Jesus hears the voice from heaven declaring that he is God's son, the beloved, the chosen Messiah, who will establish God's kingdom on earth. And it is with these words ringing in his ears that Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested.

Naturally, we wonder, what temptations must God's Messiah, the king, undergo? What are his vulnerabilities, his weak points? What might Jesus' temptations tell us about the kind of King he will be and about how he will establish his rule.

The proper role of the Messiah was a political question in Jesus' time. The people were expecting a deliverer of some kind. The question of the day was how God's Messiah would save Israel from the tyranny of Roman oppression. Would he be a clever warrior, like David? Would he raise an army to unite all Israelites across the empire? Would he rule the nations with an iron fist? What kind of king will he be? In the temptation of Jesus, we learn something about what kind of king he will be.

The devil tempts Jesus to establish God's kingdom in three ways, each of which Jesus rejects. First, the devil tempts Jesus to create bread, not only to feed himself but to feed humanity. Henry Kissinger said, "Whoever controls the food supply controls the people." If you can feed the world, you can rule the world. Yes, Jesus is hungry and weakened by hunger. Vulnerable. But the first temptation would be trivial if the Devil were only tempting Jesus to make some bread to eat. The Devil's opening line sets the context for the temptation: "If you are the Son of God..." The title "Son of God" is equivalent in Israel's traditions to the title king or Messiah. Son of God affirms not only Jesus' relationship with God, but also, and more importantly in this context, his identity as God's Messiah, the king of the coming kingdom. Will Jesus become Messiah by bread on every table? Jesus responds, "Humanity does not live by bread alone..." He's quoting Deuteronomy here. The text of Deuteronomy goes on to say, "but by every word

that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus refuses to be the bread Messiah. Humans need earthly bread, but they need more. The soul cries out for more. Jesus offers more.

In the second temptation, the Devil claims to be the ruler of the world and to have authority to make Jesus ruler of the world. If Jesus will swear allegiance to the Devil, he can become king of all nations immediately and enjoy glory and honor. But there’s a price. (Isn’t there always a price in these deals with the Devil?) Jesus will have to ally himself with the Devil, bow down to the Devil, and therefore rule the world with the Devil’s tools, the tools that every king through history has, to one degree or another, used to rule. What are these tools? Domination, violence, and lies. Jesus can seize the throne without following God’s path. The Devil’s path is a lot easier and the ego satisfaction is tremendous. Why not save the world the Devil’s way? Jesus again responds by quoting scripture: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” It’s God’s way or no way for Jesus.

In the third and final scene, the Devil tempts Jesus to establish his messianic rule at the center of Jewish power, the Temple in Jerusalem. And how better to assert his kingship, quickly and decisively, than through a spectacular miracle that will awe and convince the people that he is God’s chosen ruler.

Let me say a word about the Temple. The Jerusalem Temple was a somewhat ambiguous place for most Jews of Jesus’ time. On the one hand, it was God’s house, the navel of the world, the most holy place imaginable. On the other hand, those who ruled the Temple, the Sadducees and their associates, oppressed the common people through a system of land rents and taxation. The Sadducees had a money-making operation running out of the temple. So the Temple was itself holy, but the system within its walls was corrupt.

The Devil suggests that Jesus force God to save him in a public spectacle that will surely lead to everyone affirming that he is the Son of God, the Messiah. This again is a temptation to rule by the Devil’s rules and with the Devil’s tools. But Jesus refuses. He refuses to take the easy road to fulfilling his messianic role by allying himself with the Temple system of oppression and violence. Later in the Gospel Jesus attacks the Temple economic system directly when he overturns the tables of the merchants and cries out, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of

prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers." Jesus knows the scriptures well, and standing at the pinnacle of the Temple with the Devil's thumb in his back he quotes scripture a third time, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" God will indeed affirm Jesus, but it will be on the far side of the cross. Jesus will be the king of God's kingdom in God's time. He trusts God and refuses the Devil's shortcuts and compromises.

And then it's over. Jesus has chosen God's way. He has rejected alternative paths to fulfill his role as the Messiah. He has trusted the voice from heaven that has declared him the Son of God and refused to establish God's kingdom by the promise of bread, through domination, violence, and lies, or by plunging into his messianic role before an astonished crowd.

Jesus chooses to trust God and follow God from the beginning until the bitter end. He endures the violence of Rome without returning violence. When struck, he does not strike back. He refuses to establish his rule by violence and coercion. He chooses to reign by the power of love. He trusts that the One who validated him at his baptism will vindicate him beyond the cross.

Look at the cross. What do you see there? It is God's son. God's chosen king. Dying on a cross. The innocent victim of the empire's violent, oppressive rule. As strategies to save the world, it seems utterly powerless and absolutely crazy. The apostle Paul looked at this scene and called it God's chosen weakness and foolishness. And so it is in the eyes of humans. But Paul goes on to say that this weakness is true power and that this foolishness is divine wisdom. All human calculations of wisdom and power are declared foolish and empty at the cross. The man on the cross is God incarnate, the savior of the world.

We await God's kingdom, and we will accept no substitutes. We pray, "Your kingdom come...on earth." Bring it down, Lord God, bring down your kingdom. Domination, violence, lies—the tools of the devil's kingdom—still rule our world. Yes they do. Putin's war against Ukraine is but the latest example of this.

This is a fearful time for all people, for all nations. There is no immediate answer, no simple solution, no predictable outcome. We are a long way from the kingdom Jesus embraced and proclaimed. And yet we pray, "Your kingdom come." We're knocking on your door, God. Your kingdom... let it come! Confound the plans of the Devil, O God. Deliver us from evil.

What a way to enter Lent, right? You could wish that Putin, who wears a cross around his neck to show his piety, would repent of his violent ways and quit praying, "My kingdom come. My will be done." Seems unlikely. But Christians have this odd habit of praying for the unlikely and hoping in the face of hopelessness. Why? Because God. Because God. Viewed from here below, God's reign seems far off and unlikely, but we pray, nevertheless we pray, Your kingdom come. Deliver us from evil. Bring the kingdom. Let this be our Lenten discipline: to keep praying, shaking the gates of heaven, to keep trusting in God's love for us and for the world, to keep faith that this love is stronger than hate and that it will triumph in the end.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,  
abides under the shadow of the Almighty...  
"You are my refuge and my stronghold,  
my God in whom I put my trust."