

JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

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This is the first Sunday in Lent. It is fitting that we turn our thoughts to the occasion which our Lenten season commemorates, to the forty days and forty nights that Jesus spent in the wilderness, to the temptations He struggled with and conquered there, to His inner preparations for the external ministry He was about to begin.

Jesus had just been baptized by John the Baptist when the spirit of God descended upon Him as a dove. This symbolizes the fact that the power of God was in Him to begin His great life task, but He had still to determine the means and methods He would adopt to realize His mission. And so He went into the wilderness led by the Spirit to be alone with God and to learn through prayer what God required of Him. Like Abraham of old, the father of the faith, who wandered in the wilderness not knowing whither he was going, but led by God, so Jesus prepared for the new covenant by going alone into the wilderness to be led by God.

But along with the spirit which led him, Jesus is confronted, we read, with the tempter, the devil, Satan, and we are given an account of his temptations. Now how are we to understand these?

First of all, the word translated “to be tempted” might better be translated “to be tested”. Jesus’ experience here might be compared with the experience Abraham had when his faith was proved or tested by God. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham prepared to obey, but God stayed his hand at the last minute and offered a ram as a substitute for his first born. The King James translation reads, “And it came to pass that God did tempt Abraham.” The New English Bible reads that the time came when God put Abraham to the test. This is what Jesus’ wilderness experience is — a testing, not a temptation in the usual sense.

This is an important distinction. God does not tempt us to evil — He does test our spirits. And as steel is strengthened by the refiner’s fire, so are our spirits tested by God. The testing, the temptation so-called, we find in life is aimed not at suggesting we sin, but rather at showing our ability to conquer sin. It tries not to make us bad, but rather good. It functions not to weaken our resolve, but to strengthen it. And it points not to a penalty for being tempted, tested, but rather to the glory of the spirit of man triumphant over evil. If we are freely to follow the spirit of God, if we are to travel like Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress, then we must come to forks in the road, testing times for our resolve, temptations for solutions less than the highest. And so it was with Jesus.

What road, what method, what values should He follow in obedience to the call of God?

Then, too, we must understand the figure of the devil as a symbol of the inner struggles Jesus experienced. The outward symbol represents the profound inner struggle of Jesus. Incitement to evil may come from without but the real struggle takes place within. It is said that on the wall of Luther's room in the Wartburg Castle, there is still a black stain, caused by the ink pot that Luther is said to have hurled at the devil. However this may be, we know Luther's real struggle was an inner one in coming to terms with his new interpretation of faith. And we, I think, need not fear encounters with Satan in spite of the popularity of witchcraft talk and movies like The Exorcist. The real struggle is within. (Besides, the devils we do meet in the world are usually pretty attractive fellows; wickedness first appears in a pleasant guise.)

But what of the tests, the temptations themselves? The first one comes when the tempter says, "If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." The first thing to note is the temptation to self-doubt. If you are the Son of God, says Satan. If you have this special calling, then certain marvelous things should result. Make these stones bread! Perhaps Jesus was only mistaken when He thought He heard the voice of God proclaiming Him His Son after the baptism! Perhaps this was part of the struggle those forty days and nights. And the temptation for us all is self-doubt, self despair when the going gets tough. "What made me think I could help matters?" we may ask ourselves. But the impulse to do something originally was a response to an invitation to serve the good; it requires resolve to remain committed to it and confident in furthering it. There seems no slackening in Jesus' commitment.

But how to express it? Turn these wilderness stones, round like loaves, into bread? Jesus was hungry after so long a fast. God provided His children in the wilderness long ago with manna from heaven. And besides, extending the sense of need, Jesus knew well the poverty, hunger, and misery with which His people struggled. Why not use the power of the spirit to gain material benefits? There is a crying need for a new order in which man's material needs are satisfied. The prophet Isaiah had said, after all, that in the day of salvation, they shall not hunger nor thirst. Besides, it is an old pattern to expect benefits as a result of one's devotion to God. Some Orientals have been known to beat the images of their gods when they are disappointed in results. And there is that very human vow of Jacob, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, then shall the Lord be my God."

Let us admit this temptation, today. The real function of religion, we might say, is to make us more effective as people –it helps us to put positive thinking to work in our lives so that we prosper - and lack no good thing. Prosperity is a sign of God's favor. And religion shows us how to put God's power to work in our lives for our own benefit. The electronic church of TV today prospers in peddling this appeal.

But Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." He does not mean by this that He is unconcerned with the material needs of His fellows; He tells His followers to feed the hungry, give the thirsty drink, clothe the naked. His feeding of the multitudes with the loaves and fishes shows this. But He is saying this is not the chief purpose; we must not look to God simply for material benefits. He

tells us “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.”

This, I think, is the Christian answer to all the schemes for human salvation based on material considerations alone, whether it be the Marxian millennial myth of a classless society or our earnest hope that funding material programs will in itself solve our social problems. Jesus knew that human salvation requires more than a material remedy. He knew that bread alone will not satisfy the inner pangs of the soul; that the spirit of God is required for the transforming saving experience of life. We cannot live by bread alone. We need the water of the spirit. We need the vision of a higher kingdom to unite us, the kingdom of God and its spirit of righteousness and ethical purpose and the common feeling of being one body in Christ under God.

Let us go back in our thoughts to the dramatic scene of Jesus’ next temptation. The scene is the temple on the heights of Jerusalem and the devil puts Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple and says again, “If Thou be the Son of God, then cast Thyself down, for it is written He shall give His angels charge over Thee and in their hands they shall bear Thee up, lest at any time Thou dash Thy foot against a stone.”

There are different ways of treating this temptation or testing. Other claimants to the title of Messiah had claimed miraculous powers. One is said to have been able to fly, but then he was killed in a test trial. If Jesus really had, as the Son of God, the power of God, then clearly He should show His authority as a wonder-worker. And indeed this is a real test for Jesus. As His later ministry indicated, He was a wonder-worker. He healed the sick again and again, multiplied the loaves and fishes, stilled the tempest, walked on water, even raised the dead. Yet again and again we find Him going off by Himself in prayer, disturbed that followers seek Him only because of the signs and wonders, or perhaps only to be fed. And so He responds to the tempter — Scripture says, too — you shall not tempt, test, the Lord thy God.

What do we make of this? It seems to be a variant of the first temptation. But instead of being concerned with material values alone, one is now concerned to find some special sign of the power of God. The problem, as Jesus was to discover later, is people were interested only in the signs and not the source of the power in the spirit of God. They were eager to benefit from His power, but not eager to serve Him or follow His command of love and righteousness. Jesus knew He could be a popular wonder-worker. But this would be to appear as a great magician — not the example of quiet and humble service in obedience to the spirit of the love of God. Instead of wielding a magic wand, He showed His relation to God by examples of love and service.

And surely the temptation is still with us. It is a tendency to confuse magic with religion. Religion is the earnest wish to be used by God, to commit oneself to His will. Magic is the wish to use the power of God, to wield it for our own purposes. It is not surprising that in the history of religions, the magician and the priest are in opposition, and that the sorcerer is associated with the devil, not God. This is because their motives are opposed. The magician wishes to use the power of God, to usurp it; the religious leader wishes to be used by God and so commits himself to God’s purposes. And if a final confrontation comes between what he wishes and what God seems to demand, he says, “Thy will be done.”

I submit that popular religion misunderstands this. And certain leaders in the electronic church of TV land prosper with their claims to be vehicles of the healing power of God. And it is pathetic to see the gullible and credulous respond as they are expected to for the TV cameras. Now I don't wish to be misunderstood on this. There is a healing power from God — I believe in this — some of you have heard me refer to it in hospital visitation — but it is presumptuous to claim to be an instrument of that power. It is the act of an imposter, a charlatan — and inevitably attention is drawn to the wonder-worker and not God — in spite of the pat formulas in praise of God. And there are times we know, and Jesus' own life shows us this, when God says “no” to our earnest plea. It is the greatest heresy to think one has power with God, that one can wield His power. It is to appear as a magician and not as a religious person committed to the will of God.

There is only once, so far as I can see, when Jesus became really angry. That is when He drove the money-changers and all those who bought and sold out of the temple, saying, “It is written, my house shall be called the house of prayer — but ye have made it a den of thieves.” I think His judgment is still pertinent. Religion is the earnest prayer to be used by God, not the interest in using Him, or profiting by the practice.

The last temptation of Jesus occurs when the devil takes Him up a high mountain, shows Him all the kingdoms of the world, and promises Him them all if He but bow down and worship him. This is the one that might have been the hardest to resist. It relates to the Jewish expectation of a Messiah who would save the people from the tyranny of Rome and restore the power enjoyed in the successful Maccabean revolt. But a much wider kingdom was promised in the Messianic vision of a new order, a new heaven and a new earth under God. Now the kind of Messiah who proclaimed a new political order was the kind the Romans hanged as revolutionaries. But Jesus was not this kind of Messiah, as we know. The devil had stated and Jesus saw the price that this kingdom required — service to Satan. And He said, “It is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.” He said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” And the new heaven and new earth of the Messianic hope He interprets as the spiritual unity of the children of God united in service to the law of love.

Somehow I think we need not worry too much about this temptation. Two world wars have disenchanted us about the possibility of a military, political solution to the troubles of the world, and yet nations keep trying in places like Vietnam or Afghanistan. What we need is encouragement in the possibility of building on a concern for universal rights, a global vision for mutual human understanding and service. The temptation always is to withdraw from this vision and to be concerned with economic and military might alone, to trust in chariots and horses instead of the word of God. Yet I am convinced that moral leadership and the kind of kingdom Jesus teaches is the pattern for ultimate human brotherhood.

In this Lenten season, as we seek to renew our faith in the Easter message of the triumph of God's love, let us not ourselves fail the tests symbolized by the temptations of Jesus. And remember, as we practice symbolic acts of sacrifice, that man does not live by bread alone, that we should not tempt the Lord our God, that we should worship the Lord our God, and Him only should we serve.