

**The First Sunday of Lent
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev. Daniel T. Avery
February 21, 2010**

"When the devil had finished every test, he departed until an opportune time."

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In the story of the temptation of Jesus by the devil we learn for the first time Jesus' understanding of the nature of his ministry. We usually focus on the ministry of Jesus as teaching and healing but should remember that his ministry did not occur in a cultural or political vacuum. Luke understood well that Jesus' ministry evolved in the context of the dominating powers of the Empire and the religious establishment. These powers and principalities of the First Century offer an essential lens through which we can understand Jesus' ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus' entire ministry challenges these powers. He engages what biblical scholar Walter Wink calls "the Domination System".¹ He resists the powers and offers an alternative to their order of survival, domination, and violence. The powers respond to this threat in a predictable way: they crucify Jesus. Through his crucifixion, however, Jesus unmasks the powers as the powers of death, not life. And through his resurrection, Jesus overcomes the powers of death, sets human beings free from the fear of death, and promises the final and complete redemption of creation, including the powers themselves.

Jesus' engagement with the powers begins with his temptation in the wilderness, immediately after his baptism. In his temptation Jesus confronts and resists the devil, who is the spirit of the Domination System. The devil represents the driving force that moves and shapes the work of the particular powers and of the Domination System as a whole. In the wilderness Jesus encounters this deceiving Spirit in all its power and is tempted to take the path of survival, domination, violence, and idolatry.

Jesus' response to each temptation is a resounding no. His obedience and faithfulness takes the form of resistance. In the Gospel story we do not learn the positive direction of Jesus' ministry. We learn, instead, what Jesus will not do. We discover the kind of Messiah he will not be, the means he will not take, the ends he will not pursue. The mission of Jesus, into which he has just been baptized, begins with a "No!" to the powers and priorities that drive the world and lead to death.

Jesus says no to three particular temptations, which represent the fundamental priorities of the powers of the world. First, Jesus refuses to use his power to secure his own survival. Jesus is famished, and the devil invites him to turn "this stone" (singular in Luke 4) into bread. The devil, representing a fundamental drive of the powers, invites Jesus to use his power to meet his own needs, to ensure his own survival. Responding, as he will each time, with a text from Deuteronomy, Jesus replies, "One does not live by bread alone." Like the people in the wilderness who lived on manna, Jesus affirms that dependence on God and obedience to God are more important than securing one's own survival. We can in fact suffer "death by bread alone," as is evident in our consumer society, but "one does not live by bread alone." Jesus says no to making his own survival the top priority and to using his power to meet his own needs.

Second, the devil invites Jesus to use his power to establish a political empire grounded in the ways of the world—the ways of domination and violence. Jesus can have all worldly power if he will simply worship the devil and follow the way of the Domination System. "All of the kingdoms can be yours," the devil tells Jesus, "if you will just lord your power over others and take up the sword of the nations. Take charge of the weapons of mass destruction, deploy some troops, command the implementation of another missile defense system. All the kingdoms can be yours if you will just use the world's means of power: domination and violence.

¹ Wink, W. (1992) *Engaging the powers: Discernment and resistance in a world of domination*. Minneapolis, Fortress.

But again, Jesus says no. To serve the devil in this way would be idolatry. To take this path would set Jesus on the way of the world rather than the way of God. So Jesus refuses to take the path of domination and violence. In fact, his "No" to this path runs throughout the temptation story. The only "weapon" Jesus uses (and will ever use) against the Domination System is the Word. The only "sword" Jesus will take up is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17). Jesus does not use his power to destroy even the devil by means of violence or domination. Rather, he lives with the confidence expressed in Martin Luther's great hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God": "The prince of darkness grim; We tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, For lo! His doom is sure, One little word shall fell him." Jesus says no to the path of violence and domination.

The devil then turns to Scripture for the final temptation, reminding us what Shakespeare said in *The Merchant of Venice* (I.iii.99), "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." Quoting from Psalm 91, the devil tempts Jesus to use God for his own ends, to make God an instrument for his own success and popularity. By jumping off the temple and having God's angels protect him before the eyes of all the people, Jesus could give the people dramatic proof of who he is; he could give them the kind of Messiah they want and could avoid misunderstanding and rejection. "Come on, Jesus," the devil taunts, "God will protect you; the Scriptures say so. Use God just this once as a means to your personal goals." This avenue is one the powers take all the time. How often, for example, do nations call on God in the midst of war and seek to make God a servant of their own goals in order to ensure popular support? And how often does the capitalist system claim divine sanction, even within our churches? This is one of the ways in which the powers make idols of themselves—by subordinating the living God to their own ends. But again, Jesus says no to this kind of idolatry. He will not test God in this way; he will not try to use God for his own ends.

Luke concludes the story with a foreboding word; "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time" (4:13). This rather ominous conclusion provides a critical link between the temptations and the cross. The "opportune time" when the devil will return is the time of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, when the Domination System will not simply test Jesus with words but attack him with actions. The final verse in Luke's temptation story thus stands as a warning: don't try to understand the cross apart from the particular story of Jesus that runs from temptation to crucifixion. There is an essential narrative connection between Jesus' life and his death. The cross cannot be plopped down out of the blue as a magical transaction between God and individual sinners. Rather, Jesus' resistance to the powers leads to his crucifixion and gives the cross its distinctive meaning.

In the temptation story, the drama of the gospel is foreshadowed both by the powers and by Jesus. On their part, the powers must crucify Jesus because of the "No" he speaks to their way. Intent on their own survival at all costs, the powers must crucify the one who threatens their authority. Committed to domination by the sword, the powers must put to death the one who challenges their most basic values. Making idols of themselves by using God for their own ends, the powers must crucify one who names their pretensions and serves God alone. On his part, in the wilderness Jesus takes up the way of the cross. By rejecting the way of survival, domination, violence and idolatry, he takes the first step down the path of crucifixion. If Jesus had chosen the way of survival, he would have avoided crucifixion. If he had chosen the way of violent domination, he would not have succumbed to the cross. And if he had chosen to use God for his own ends he would have never ended up at Golgotha.

In the temptation story, then, we have a glimpse of the fundamental conflict for every Christian—the conflict between the way of God and the way of the powers, between the way of life and the way of death that eventually, at an "opportune time," will end on the cross. The crucifixion is no accident and no magical transaction isolated from the life and ministry of Jesus. The cross is a direct consequence of Jesus' resistance to the powers of death in the world. This season of Lent gives each of us forty days to ponder the way we will choose.