

Tempted to Win

Luke 4:1-13

The Second Sunday in Lent, (March 16) 2025

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I think it is safe to say, that most all of us love the great myths, the great stories that tell us who we are and how we came to be and who we dream of becoming. We love the story of the little peasant boy in an unknown village who grows up to be king, or the cinder-girl who becomes a princess. Stories that capture our hopes and dreams, stories of heartache and grief, stories of joy and triumph. Whenever we hear the words, “once upon a time” we are sent to another time and another place. Stories that begin like:

*Once upon a time, in a quiet forest surrounded by towering trees and colorful wildflowers, a gentle fawn named Bambi was born.*

Or –

*Once upon a time there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person. – Back When We Were Grownups, Anne Tyler*

Or what about this opening line?

*In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. – The Hobbit*

And this much beloved story beginning –

*The year that Buttercup was born, the most beautiful woman in the world was a French scullery maid named Annette. – The Princess Bride*

Or have you heard this one about a baby born to be king:

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. – Luke 2:1-5*

Using the tropes of great stories of kings and kingdoms, princes born to greatness, Luke draws us into the greatest of stories. In the first chapter, there is an announcement by a messenger from heaven that a king will be born to a teenage peasant girl, named Maria. She responds in part:

*With his strong arm/ He scatters the big boys/ Who think they're somebody. / He pulls thrones from under the royalty/ And gives dignity to the lowly. / He loads the hungry with good things/ But the rich he lets go with nothing at all. / Mindful of mercy, he gives a lift to his people. (Luke 1:46-55, The Cotton Patch Version, Clarence Jordan).*

Suddenly, we realize this king to be born will not be anything like we've heard before.

Luke continues in the second chapter to the story of the birth in the very place where the archetype of kings had been born – Bethlehem, the City of David. Then he goes on in Luke 3 with a genealogy proving this newborn king is a direct descendant of David. According to some of the Psalms, the true Son of David will

be the king, who will win the battle, defeat God's enemies, and make Israel great again like it was back in David's time.

Luke 3 also tells us there was a commissioning and anointing of this king/messiah, this new ruler, in baptism and there were even words from heaven confirming his kingship: "This is my beloved Son; with him I am well pleased."

Announcement, birth, and commissioning. Now comes the testing. What kind of king, what kind of ruler or messiah will he become?

It is the wilderness, the desert, where everything is stripped away, where there are beasts and demons and the unknown, a place of chaos and confusion, where the testing will take place. The young king will be challenged by the devil, also known as the Confuser. This is where this young king, Jesus is his name, must hammer out who he is, what he is going to do, and what his Way is going to be like. He has said "Yes" to God in baptism, now he has to figure out what he is going to say "No" to. Will he be like what his mother Mary foretold, or will he fulfill the wishful thinking of everyone in Judea who were beaten down and left out by Roman power, and kick some Roman booty, drain the swamp, and win!?

In 1671 John Milton wrote *Paradise Regained*, his retelling and interpretation of Jesus' temptations. In Book I, he has Jesus thinking about what he could do if he was king:

*My Spirit aspired, victorious deeds/ Flamed in my heart, heroic acts, one while/ To rescue Israel from the Roman yoke, / Then to subdue and quell o'er all the earth/ Brute violence and proud Tyrannic power, / Till truth were freed, and equity restored. (Book I, ll. 215-220).*

So, into the wilderness, dreaming of what he could do, might do, or wishes he could do, Jesus goes head-to-head, with the Confuser, with nothing more than what the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6 calls the weapons of the spirit. Forty days of battle against the Prince of Darkness grim. Flannery O'Connor referred to the devil, "not as some generalized evil, but an evil intelligence" determined to defeat the purposes of God (*Habit of Being*, letter Nov. 20, 1959). New Testament scholar Walter Wink called Satan "the spirit of the systems of domination."

It is important that we understand the world of the New Testament and what it is trying to say to us: this story of salvation, redemption, and the New Creation of God is about God and us, but it is also about a third power, variously referred to as the Enemy, Evil, Satan, the Devil, the demonic, Lucifer, the great Antagonist, or the Confuser. The Apostle Paul does not use the name Satan but instead speaks of the Principalities and Powers and the Powers of Sin and Death. These are the spirit of systems of domination. Systems have a spiritual aspect to them just like an individual person does. And Paul assumes that these systems, though originally created by God for good and order and peace in this world, have rebelled against God, and seek their own enhancement and domination of everything and everyone else, and to which we are enslaved.

Satan is the personification of the spirit of all the organizations, corporations, political parties, systems of governance, the White House, Congress, the Supreme Court, the Kremlin, Westminster, legislatures, armies, Wall Street, religious bodies, the Vatican, the Southern Baptist Convention, universities, associations, and institutions you can imagine, and they all come together to challenge this young upstart king and convince him that if he wants to win, if he wants the power to make things come out the way he wants, then he will need to bow to them, join them, and become part of them.

And Luke tells us that Jesus came up out of the commissioning of the waters of baptism and walked straight into this heart of darkness, the belly of the beast. This young king invades the Kingdom of Death.

Jesus fasts for forty days, an ancient practice focusing all of oneself in God. In Jesus' fast, the Confuser, the Master of Lies and Misinformation comes and tempts him to turn the rocks and stone into bread. Jesus says, "No," and then adds, "One does not live by bread alone." Matthew's version of this same story adds, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," quoting Deut. 8:3. Jesus is prepared to face the darkness and the misinformation because he has rooted himself in the Word of the Living God.

Folks, if we're going to deal with misinformation and distortions of the Bible, the answer is we need to know our Bible! Jesus goes head-to-head with the great Antagonist, the great Confuser and he can do so because he knows his Bible better than the Confuser!

The Confuser is saying, "If you'll feed the crowds, you can be a powerful king. A king who finally wins and makes everything come out the way you want. You can be the kind of king who controls all the bread in the world. You'll control Wall Street, direct all the wealth of the world. You'll become an economic genius and feed the world, make billions upon billions of dollars, and everyone will bow at your feet.

Jesus says, "No!"

Then the Confuser takes him up to where Jesus can glimpse all the kingdoms and nations and political powers of the world and says, "I'll give you all the power and authority over all these, if you'll bow down and worship me." Once more

Jesus responds with Scripture, “The Bible says worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” – Deut. 6:3.

The Confuser is saying, “Ah, Jesus, if you want power, power to be victorious, I’ll give you power. You can rule nations, create empires, conquer Greenland and Canada, and become the greatest of all emperors. You don’t have to waste your time with little things. Instead, you can use the nation-state to advance your own aims. Become the ultimate nationalist. Don’t waste effort trying to get people to worship God; worship the nation instead. Wrap yourself in the flag, force the Ten Commandments in the schools, force students to study religion but make sure it is the religion you, the ruler, approves.” The Confuser says, “Bow down to me, Jesus and then you can run for office, get elected, seize the government of the world and rule over everyone!”

Oh, what a temptation! Jesus says, “No!” But across the centuries the church has all too often said “Yes!”

In the year 312 CE Constantine was fighting Maxentius to see who would become the one and only Roman emperor. Constantine won the Battle of Milvian Bridge and suddenly remembers that he had prayed beforehand, and the Christian God gave him the victory, he said. Suddenly, the church and the Christian faith went from a religion of the marginalized who practiced servanthood and refused to use violence like Jesus, to the religion of the most powerful man and government in the world, where the emphasis became how best to keep the empire going and under what circumstances is it justified to use violence. (By the way, the answer has most always been whenever the emperor says violence is justified, then it is justified.) It changed everything. From then on, much of Christianity (not all of it) has thought in terms of power, of rule, of dominion. Even 1200 years later during

the Reformation, the predominant way of thinking was whichever way a Ruler of a nation believed, then everyone in that nation worshiped and believed the same way. There was no religious liberty and certainly no such thing as separation of church and state. It took the Anabaptists and later the baptists to say that the rulers and the nation-state have nothing to say about who and how we worship, interpret the Bible, or pray. As a result, the Anabaptists and later the baptists were hunted down by everyone else and burned at the stake or drowned in rivers because the rulers said we loved water so much.

For example, in 1644 Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law against baptists (like Roger Williams next door in Rhode Island) saying that baptists are “incendiaries of commonwealths, and the infectors of persons, and troublers of churches in all places they have been.” We were outlawed mainly because we did not believe in Christian nationalism that saw the Christian faith integrated with the nation/state.

This last summer Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said, “We need to be the party of nationalism and I’m a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists.” Congresswoman Lauren Boebert said a few days before that, “The church is supposed to direct the government, the government is not supposed to direct the church. I’m tired of this separation of church and state junk.”

Five hundred years ago, we baptists were hunted down by the likes of Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert. Two thousand years ago, Jesus said a loud and clear “No!” to the Confuser and his nationalism, and Austin Heights we say a loud and clear “No!” today.

Our new church sign out front will say “Austin Heights Church.” Perhaps we need down at the bottom the abbreviation: I.C.W. meaning Austin Heights Church – Incendiaries of Commonwealths.

Finally, the Confuser takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” Then the Master of Lies and Misinformation quotes the Bible himself from the Psalms, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.” And then another verse, “On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

In other words, “I can use the Bible just as well as anyone so let me use the Bible to convince you to be a spectacular religious leader and use God to get what you want. Use God as a means to achieve your own goals. Get your own television show, go live stream when you jump from the pinnacle of the Temple and when the angels save you, you’ll have thousands and thousands following you.”

Jesus replies again from Deut. 6 (v.16), “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

And Luke says with that, the Confuser departed from Jesus until an opportunity presents itself in the future. And let there be no doubt, the Confuser shows up again and again, to sew lies, to manipulate, and distract, and finally, when all else fails, with action. If the young king/messiah cannot be convinced or distracted or diverted or manipulated with misinformation, then finally he must be killed. On the cross the Powers crucified Jesus, with a sign above his head which said, “King of the Jews,” so everyone can see what happens to so-called kings try to go up against the Powers of Death and Domination.



But in the meantime, what does the story tells us happened next? There was an announcement, a birth, and then commissioning and testing. What's next?

Luke says that Jesus returns to Galilee and goes to Nazareth, his hometown, and shows up in the synagogue – for our purposes this morning – he goes to his home church. They invite Jesus, their prodigy, to stand up and preach. What's he going to preach? What's his platform? We readers and hearers of the story know what Jesus stands against. What does he stand for?

He steps into the pulpit. Everyone leans forward. The place gets quiet. He opens the Bible and reads:

*He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind: to set at liberty those who are oppressed. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord – the Jubilee when the rich give back to the poor so that all debts are cancelled. When there is a new leveling of society, and those on the bottom are lifted up while those on the top are taken down a couple of notches.*

He closes the book. There are gasps but everyone is silent. They are stunned. But then they are shocked and outraged, as Jesus concludes with two brief anecdotes. The first is about the prophet Elijah being fed by the widow of Zarephath, not a Jew! The second was about the prophet Elisha and the healing of Naaman the Syrian, also not a Jew!

Jesus, the new king, the messiah's platform is the Jubilee and the economic restructuring of society, liberating the poor. If that's not enough! It reaches beyond of any particular nation/state, any particular race or ethnic group. This New Way of Jesus is for all people!

The non-violent revolution has begun.

This was his platform and calling.

It still is.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.