

Welcome

Welcome to Palm Sunday here at Catalyst! I wanted to begin today with something unusual. Today, we're exploring the final Temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness - when the devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would bow down and worship him.

A few years ago, I tried to imagine what that must have been like for Jesus. I wrote a short story imagining that temptation, and I want to share it with you today. Here is the first part of the story:

Jesus and the Accuser landed high on a mountain. Jesus shivered in the cold, so the Accuser unfurled his wings to encompass Jesus.

"My apologies. Humans are not made for these heights. Stay close to me and you will be safe."

Jesus, his eyes were wide with wonder, complied without complaint.

"Do you know what awaits you, Messiah?"

Jesus tore his gaze from the vista spread before him and looked directly at the Accuser. "I do not."

"What game do you play? The Messiah is to be king, but you are a carpenter."

It wasn't just his hunger. The Accuser saw the weight of Jesus' doubts heavy on his shoulders. But he said only, "My father is faithful."

The Accuser smiled. "Indeed, Jesus. Is that not why The Name has sent me to you?"

Jesus looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"It was wise of The Name to give you humble beginnings. The people will love you. They will sense that you know them as their kings and prefects don't.

"But the Messiah must be king. And, forgive me, Jesus, but you are not prepared to take this world for The Name. Let me show you."

The Accuser pointed down the mountain and Jesus could see a Roman man slouched on a bench. Jesus guessed he was past forty. Though he seemed to be relaxing, he gave the air of a snake coiled to strike. The room was stark in the Roman way, but Jesus' experienced eye recognized this was a man of great wealth.

The Accuser explained, "This is Lucius Aelius Sejanus. A born soldier, he has climbed the Roman ranks. When Tiberius tired of Roman politics, he stepped away, leaving his good friend Sejanus to rule in all but name.

"Now that Tiberius' mother, Livia Drusilla has died, Sejanus is making his play for the throne. While the legions crucify their enemies abroad, Sejanus is removing those who oppose him

quietly, carefully. He is among the craftiest of Roman men, and were he more careful, he would be Emperor within the year.

“But he is prideful, as clever men are. He forgets that, while Tiberius tired of politics, he is not bad at the game. He is the son of Livia Drusilla, adopted son of Augustus himself. Even now, Tiberius weaves webs and lays traps to snare Sejanus. He will fall.

“Though Tiberius is crafty, he made the fatal Roman mistake: looking weak. His schemes will likely bring down Sejanus; his reputation is doomed no matter what. Will there be more chaos? Or will the enemies massing at their borders unite the squabbling Senators?”

“Tiberius craved power, but found it to be unsatisfying. Now he seeks to abandon the throne he took. But power is like water, rushing in to fill any holes it finds. Tiberius makes Rome weak.”

The scene shifted. Now, Jesus saw a dark-skinned man on a golden throne. The contrast with the Roman way was sharp – everything was gilded, the throne adorned with animals and plants, the king himself – for that is obviously what he was – draped in heavy, opulent robes. A slave stood behind him, far enough in the shadows as to go unnoticed. He held the crown, heavy with jewels, ready to set it on his master’s head before the day’s audiences began.

“Speaking of Rome’s enemies, this is Arsaces of Parthia, the twenty-eighth of his name, called the King of kings and Lord of lords. Before ascending the throne, he was Artabanus, the third of his name.

“He sits uneasy on his throne – his predecessors have been deposed one after another. He is someone’s cousin or grandchild; it hardly matters to the Parthians. They like him for his lust for battle – he was raised among the nomadic tribes to the east.

“Arsaces sees visions of Parthia’s former glory. He imagines himself to be greater than the Caesars. He is not, Jesus. He will try, as have so many before him. His only hope is that Rome falls to infighting over Tiberius’ legacy. But he does not see this. He is arrogant to a fault, blinded by ambition. This makes him weak.”

The scene shifted again, this time to the Vandals and Visigoths to Rome’s North. Then again to the Franks, the Alamanni and Saxons far to the West.

In the South, Jesus saw the kingdom of Kush. “Kush has fought Rome and lost on more than one occasion. Her people are weary of war, willing to serve with the illusion of freedom, to embrace Rome’s peace if it is the only peace they can have.”

Village after village filled with peoples whose skin was dark as the night, speaking languages Jesus had never heard even in cosmopolitan Sepphoris. Nation after nation of proud kings, fearsome warriors, indecipherable politics. And each one, the Accuser named, explained, revealed hidden weaknesses.

Far to the East, Jesus saw Emperor Guangwu. “He is a proud son of the Han dynasty. He has only recently slain a usurper and proclaimed himself emperor. He now faces his kinsmen, who have equal claim to the throne as he does. He is fearsome, but his position is precarious.”

The Accuser placed a hand on Jesus' shoulder. "And now let us cross the great sea." Jesus' eyes widened as he the ocean passed beneath him and a new continent spread beneath them.

A huge city sprawled around them, a network of streets flanked by huge buildings. The vision brought them to a wide plaza flanked by palaces, small buildings that seemed to be temples, and a large pyramid behind them. Every surface was covered with bright murals depicting stories Jesus ached to learn. Ahead, a wide roadway called to Jesus' mind the Roman forums.

"Welcome to Teotihuacan," the Accuser announced, his voice struggling not at all with the strange syllables. This is the greatest city in this land. Behind us stands the Pyramid of the Moon. Ahead of us stretches the Avenue of the Dead. It is an auspicious day for this people. Let us follow them."

Jesus was too amazed to argue. He merely followed the Accuser as they descended the plaza, coming to the back of a great parade. Jesus noticed that none of the short, dark-skinned people took note of them.

"This is still a vision?" He asked the Accuser.

The Accuser shushed him. "Don't miss the Pyramid of the Sun."

Jesus could not have missed the massive building rising to his left. Instinctively, Jesus took in the construction with the eyes of a builder. The jagged top indicated it was incomplete, and if it was a pyramid as the Accuser claimed, then it would be nearly double the size of the Pyramid of the Moon when finished.

Cries of fear tore his gaze from the ascending pyramid to the parade. At the head of the parade, Jesus could discern men and women calling out, their hands bound behind them. Though he could not understand them, he saw they were begging.

"They are to be sacrificed to Quetzalcoatl, the great winged serpent. Can you save them, Messiah?"

Message

Today is Palm Sunday, the last Sunday of Lent. For six weeks, we've been preparing ourselves for this next week of walking with Jesus toward the cross, and on to the resurrection Easter morning.

This year, our Lent series has been "Bad Deal". We've explored the nature of temptation. Our English translations use a couple of different words for the same idea: testing and tempting. We think of temptation as always bad, but in the Bible, the idea of temptation is more neutral, like the word test. Tests reveal the state of our lives. They're an opportunity for us to see the truth of our lives. Do we really trust God? Or are we trusting something or someone else?

We began with our most basic test: natural cravings. To be human is to have desires. Jesus showed us that we don't live by bread alone, but by seeking out connection with the "bread of Heaven".

Next, we faced our desire for certainty. We saw that a desire to test God is a sign of an immature faith, and that Jesus invites us to grow into a real trust because his path leads through a cross - and going there with him requires a lot of courage and faith.

Last week, we saw that good times are their own kind of test: will we be faithful when life is good, when we prosper? Or will we begin to trust in ourselves, in our own abilities, rather than remember everything comes from God?

And that brings us to this final temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness, one where the devil took him to the mountaintop and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world.

Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. "I will give it all to you," he said, "if you will kneel down and worship me."

"Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'"

Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus. -- Matthew 4:8–11 NLT

How could Jesus have been anything other than overwhelmed? He knew he was to be the Messiah, the savior of the world, but he barely knew any of the Roman politicians. Yet he was presented with a world of kings and would-be kings. All the hidden lines of power, the inscrutable politics and intrigue that a simple Galilean peasant wouldn't know. And here he had the one responsible for working to bring out the worst in humankind offering him the keys to every kingdom.

After all, what could it mean that the devil is offering him the kingdoms of the world? Today, we might say that the devil knows where all the bodies are buried. The devil was offering Jesus the pathway to ultimate power. That's what "worship me" is really about - bow down and acknowledge that my way is the way to life and flourishing.

Remember humanity's first temptation? The knowledge of good and evil will make us like God? That temptation is echoed here: Jesus, let me give you everything you need to either crush your enemies or make them lick your sandals.

But Jesus refuses. Quoting Deuteronomy, he insists that we're only to worship God. Which is a religious way of saying that God's way is the only one we trust to lead us to life. That was Moses' concern, too. Remember, Israel was about to leave the scarcity of the wilderness to enter the abundance of the Promised Land. And Moses knew that with abundance comes a relaxing of the very practices that sustain us in the wilderness. So he said:

The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant. When

you have eaten your fill in this land, be careful not to forget the Lord, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. You must fear the Lord your God and serve him. When you take an oath, you must use only his name. -- Deuteronomy 6:11–13 NLT

In the Promised Land, it'll be easier to believe that the ways of the other gods lead to prosperity and flourishing. But Israel must hold onto the lessons of the wilderness: only God's way leads to life.

So too, that is Jesus' test here. He knows that if he pursues God's path, he will face a cross. And now the devil is offering him a way out - all he has to do is turn his back on God's way and embrace another way to power... a way that looks a lot like Caesar's.

I want to finish my story from earlier. In his whirlwind tour of the kingdoms of the world, the devil has brought Jesus to the Aztec empire (though Jesus doesn't know that).

Cries of fear tore his gaze from the ascending pyramid to the parade. At the head of the parade, Jesus could discern men and women calling out, their hands bound behind them. Though he could not understand them, he saw they were begging.

"They are to be sacrificed to Quetzalcoatl, the great winged serpent. Can you save them, Messiah?"

Jesus' head snapped toward the Accuser, his eyes hard behind a veil of tears. His voice was hard. "Do you value their lives so little?"

Now the Accuser hardened his own voice. "I do not jest, Son of The Name. Answer me truthfully. Can you save them? Do you know who rules this city? Do you comprehend the lines of power that stretch from this great city across the lands, the cracks in the alliances you might exploit to conquer them that you might tear this temple down? No. You do not even know their tongue, or where this land may be found, or the ship that might carry you here.

"This earth is filled with peoples and powers and you are but a carpenter. Though your own people might love you – might, I remind you, these nations will care nothing for you or for the one who made them.

"I can give them to you. I can teach you, guide you. I will tell you their weaknesses, guide you in how you might exploit their vices and manipulate their virtues."

Jesus was silent. He watched as the priests led the soldiers, sacrifices and worshippers into the Temple. Finally, the Accuser continued. "You can bring light to these barbarians."

Jesus spoke softly now, his voice heavy with the weight of all he had seen. "You call them barbarians. A Roman word. As though these sacrifices are not of a kind with Roman crosses. What does it matter if they are sacrificed to a feathered serpent or to the glory of a Caesar? It is power exploited, Accuser."

Now Jesus faced him again. "And you would have me rule as one worse than the Caesars, worse than these Gentile kings. You offer to set me up as the king above all kings. But I will not

be this sort of king. Moses warned us that The Name alone is God, that we are to worship only Him.”

“How will you save them, Messiah?” The Accuser saw he was losing Jesus. “How will you rule? With a kiss of greeting? With good will? Did not your namesake, Joshua, drive the Canaanites from the land? Did not your father David battle the Philistines with the help of The Name? Let me show you how to be king. Follow my way and you will save the world.”

“I cannot follow your way. I will not.” Jesus was stone; the Accuser saw he would not be moved.

“Take me back, Accuser. Leave me in peace.”

For Jesus to resist this final temptation is for him to insist that no form of compulsion or control is the way to flourishing. If it's wrong for Caesar, then it's wrong for him, too. Intentions don't make his way holier. Rather, there must be a real, measurable difference between how Jesus rules and how Caesar - or any of the other kings of the world - rule.

So let's bring this into today. What does power look like in your life?

What are the lines of power in your house? What about among your social circle? In your work?

How do you participate in the lines of power in our culture? With regard to politics. With regard to race and gender.

Are you walking the path of Jesus, or the path of Caesar?

I mentioned at the open today that this is Palm Sunday. This is the day we remember Jesus entering into Jerusalem, being welcomed as a King. What we miss is that, while Jesus entered from the East, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was entering from the West. The contrast was intentional - Pilate entered on a white stallion, flanked by the infamous Roman soldiers. Jesus entered on a donkey, flanked by peasants waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna,” which means “Praise to God!”

Pilate's way is strength. Jesus' is weakness.

Pilate's is wealth. Jesus' is poverty.

Pilate's is power and control. Jesus' is gentleness and invitation.

Which are we following, friends?

Communion + Examen

Jesus shares his meal and his kingdom with us.

When in the last week have my actions and responses been gentle, kind and peace-filled?

When in the last week have I acted out of self-interest or self-protection?

When in the next week might I be tempted to act out of selfishness?

How can I choose to follow Jesus in self-giving love this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Holy Week Fast