

“Plan B”

Luke 4: 1-13

A sermon preached at Duke University Chapel by Rev. Jeremy Troxler
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*“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,
where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”*

A man named Lord Acton famously said, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In one case at least, he was wrong.

JESUS, THE DESERT, AND THE DEVIL

Jesus is still dripping wet from his baptism in the Jordan River, still has his Father’s voice echoing in his ears saying, “This is my beloved Son,” is still busting at the seams with Holy Spirit, when he makes a journey out into the howling desert. In the Lord’s prayer, we pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” After his baptism, Jesus is led directly into temptation, delivered to the doorstep of evil. The barren wild of the badlands will be his testing ground, as it was for his people Israel after Moses led them out of Egypt. In that place of emptiness Jesus will empty himself. He will fast and he will pray. He will meditate on the Scriptures. Within his desert cave Jesus will prepare for the ministry that will one day see him laid in another cave: the cave that will be his tomb.

Jesus is not alone in that cave of course: before he went down to Georgia, the devil went down to Judea, looking for a soul to steal. Luke refers to the devil here as the *diabolos*, a Greek word that gives us our English word, diabolical. El Diablo is the personification, the embodiment of the shadow-spirit of this world, of all that is contrary to the kingdom of God. And even though the Tempter may more often take the form of a whisper within than a demon without, as a Carolina grad still bitter about the result of Wednesday’s game, you’ll forgive me if I prefer to still imagine the devil as having dark blue horns, dark blue cape, and dark blue pitchfork. And a diabolical three point shot. And smack the floor defense. And a chant about my team going to visit his place.

We don’t know what Jesus sees or doesn’t see, or what he hears or doesn’t hear when the devil wonders through: though for some reason I am also convinced that the Tempter talks kind of like Mrs. O’Brien from Downton Abbey. We don’t even know whether Jesus knows exactly whom he is up against at first: the diabolical one probably prefers to remain camouflaged, perhaps even dismissed as a myth, as he pursues his ends. After all, it’s the snake still in the grass that you have to worry about: it’s the black ice you can’t see that is most dangerous.

Whatever Jesus sees or hears, what follows is a contest from what really is THE biggest rivalry in all of history, played out on a neutral court: a kind of epic duel that eclipses anything Hollywood could come up with about Sherlock and Moriarty, Potter and Voldemort, Batman and the Joker.

In his book *Manna and Mercy*, Daniel Erlander imagines the confrontation as one where the tempter is a leadership guru dressed in an Italian suit and leading a Messiah success seminar. The Tempter uses a snappy PowerPoint presentation to commend to Jesus the virtues of Plan A over Plan B. Plan A is an evidence-based approach to use force, offer impressive displays, promise rewards, engage in political

maneuvering, and pull all the levers of power to accomplish God's ends. Plan B, on the other hand, basically boils down to living faithfully, loving vulnerably, suffering hopefully, and then getting killed: trusting in God to make it right.

"If you want to succeed as Messiah," the tempter says, "follow Plan A."

Three times, Jesus will choose Plan B.

PERKS OF POWER?

Round One begins. Jesus is weak and trembling from his fast. In the recovery community, they sometimes use the acronym "HALT," "H-A-L-T" to remind themselves that the times when they are most vulnerable to temptation are when they are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired. Jesus is at least 3 of the 4. So Mr. Diabolical helpfully suggests, "Jesus, you need to engage in a little self-care. The Son of God shouldn't have to suffer like this. You need to eat something. Since you are the Son of God (it says, "if," but it means "since"), Since you are the Son of God, why don't you bake some boulders into bread, change some gravel into gluten? After all, God once whipped up wonderbread in the wilderness for his people after Egypt: since you are the Son of God, why don't you make some magic manna yourself?

This isn't one of those behavioral experiments where a small child is left alone in a room with a marshmallow and told that if they can resist eating it for five minutes they'll get two more marshmallows. What's at stake here is more than a snack: it is the question of how Jesus will use the unique power given to him as Son of God. Will he use this power for himself? Does being Prince of Peace have its perks? Will he use the power to keep from having to suffer as so many other human beings do?

The tempter's words, "Since you are . . ." invite Jesus to believe that his power makes him special, different, that he can roll back a part of the incarnation, and does not have to really, fully accept the limits of being a creature or a human being. Our own most insidious temptations to use power for ourselves also begin with the justification, "Since you are . . .". They invite us to believe we are somehow above the limits laid out for others. "Since you are the head of the department . . .", "Since you are a top student . . .", "Since you are working so hard . . .", "Since you are unhappily married . . .", "Since you are . . ."

In Jesus' case the devil's invitation may also be the temptation to believe that his ministry will focus only on meeting material needs: changing enough stones to bread to put food on every plate and a turkey in every pot. That is a beautiful goal, and part of what it means to seek the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven: that is precisely why it is so insidiously tempting to believe that meeting material needs is enough. But the human heart has hungers as well as the stomach: bread and circuses are not enough for the soul. Woman and man need more than manna: we need the fast as well as the food.

We need God.

In the Bible's story everything began to go wrong when Adam and Eve listened to a tempter and ate: things begin to go right when Jesus hears the tempter and doesn't. Jesus will not use his power for himself, and he will not limit that power to the merely material. "The human," he says, quoting Scripture, "The human, (of which I am one as well), does not live by bread alone."

Plan B.

THE LOVE OF POWER OR THE POWER OF LOVE?

Round two. The devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain, where the kingdoms and capitals of the world are displayed in all their glittering glory. With a sweep of his hand, tempter says, "Authority over all these I shall give to you, if only you will kiss my ring and bow down to me." Basically he says, "Luke, I mean Jesus, I am your father. If only you knew the power of the dark side. Join me, and we shall rule the galaxy!"

Robert Caro's acclaimed multi-volume biography of former President Lyndon Johnson reads like a Greek tragedy as it tells the story of a brilliant and flawed man whose single goal was to achieve power. Caro writes that Johnson, out of a sense of insecurity and a will to be in control, had "a hunger for power in its most naked form, . . . (a hunger) so fierce and consuming that no consideration of morality or ethics, no cost to himself—or to anyone else—could stand before it." And so Caro writes that Johnson stole elections, made shady business deals, courted powerful friends, bullied opponents and staff, and occasionally shifted his positions on key issues according to the political winds. He would use his imposing physical height to lean in close and intimidate someone who disagreed with him. He would ingratiate himself to older, more powerful Senators by taking the pose of a student sitting at the feet of a master, flattering their wisdom, playing on the paternal instincts and telling many of them, "You've been just like a Daddy to me." For Caro's Johnson, power was an end in itself: and the end of power would justify whatever means were used to amplify or maintain it. Plan A.

Back atop the mountain, the devil wants to be just a like a Daddy to Jesus, and offers him a similar path. The tempter offers Jesus the power of glory and authority: and all it would take for Jesus to have such power is to take the Performance Enhancing Drug of bowing down to him, following his methods, choosing plan A. Perhaps the tempter even whispers to Jesus that if Jesus had such coercive power over the kingdoms of this world, he would really be able to feed the hungry, help the hurting, and share the message of the Gospel: then the good ends would justify the diabolical means.

It's a temptation that Jesus' people have often succumbed to. Deceased Catholic priest and Christian writer Henri Nouwen writes that "The temptation to consider (coercive) power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the gospel is the greatest temptation of all. With this rationalization, crusades took place; inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in."

Nouwen points out that we face a constant temptation to replace love with power. Why? Nouwen speculates, "Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life."

But love is itself a form of power: perhaps the one power that really is power. And Jesus chooses this power of love over the love of other power so-called. Jesus refuses to build the Kingdom of God with the devil's tools. He knows who his Daddy is. "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Plan B.

THE TEMPTATION TO BECOME A TEMPTER

One last, third time, Jesus is tempted. He finds himself standing on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, staring down into the void of the valley floor far below. Imagine standing on the ledge at the top of the tower of Duke Chapel, feeling the dizzying vertigo as you look down between your feet. The tester whispers, "Since you are the Son of God, jump." The he quotes Scripture: "After all, doesn't the Psalm say, 'He will command his angels to protect you?' Doesn't it promise, 'on their hands they will catch you, so you won't so much as stub your toe, dash your foot against a stone?'"

This may be the most mysterious temptation that Jesus will face. It doesn't make sense at first: my cousin commented that jumping off to see if God will save you seems kind of like crashing your car to see if the car's airbag works. What is going on here?

Is it a temptation to dazzle the religious folks of the temple and win their worship by becoming a kind of miraculous messianic meteor flashing across the sky? Is it just the deep dark self-destructive temptation to do something crazy, that voice that makes you wonder, as you drive over a bridge, what if I went over the side? Is it even an invitation to suicide? Could Jesus understand the plight of those who feel so overwhelmed by their burdens that the only way forward they can see is to take a step off the ledge?

Or is it a temptation for Jesus to believe that since he is special, the Son of God, he will be exempted from death or suffering, thanks to some kind of angelic Savior's secret service? Is it a temptation to turn God into merely our protector, simply a sanctified security blanket, a heavenly parachute for when we fall: but nothing more?

In a strange way, by pretending to urge him to reckless trust in God, the devil seems to be tempting Jesus to take his life back into his own hands: to act in a way that will force God to respond, rather than living a life which is itself a response to God. Jesus is tempted to force God's hand: to assertively seek proof of God's promise, beyond the assurance that God has given: to use God, rather than to trust God. The tempter is trying to turn Jesus into a tempter: for Jesus is being invited to test God in the same way the devil is testing him: "Since you are God . . . defy the laws of gravity and save me." What makes this so insidious, beyond the Scripture quotation, is that the Father of Jesus so often does call for leaps of faith into the unknown: and yet this particular jump wouldn't be so much a leap of faith as a drop of doubt. It an act that arises not out of belief, but unbelief: from that insecurity that longs to turn faith into "fact."

In the end, Jesus will accomplish God's work not by provoking a miraculous divine rescue, but through his suffering and passion: less by what he does than by what he allows to be done to him in submission to God's will. He will not seek the cup of suffering, but when it is presented to him, he will drink it to the dregs. He will not seek death by cross, but when it is laid upon him, he will carry it.

So Jesus refuses to jump: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Plan B.

OUR WILDERNESS

Here at the beginning of Lent, Duke does not look like a howling desert wilderness. But it, too, is a place of power, and therefore a place of testing. Hidden in the shadow of outrageous ambition is also

outrageous temptation. Your cave might be your cubicle. A meeting room might be your mountaintop. The tip of the temple might be the pinnacle of your profession. And when the tempter comes to us in those places, as C.S. Lewis has written, it will most likely not be in a dramatic moment of decision, or from an obviously bad person. It may happen (in an email) or sitting alone at the computer, or “it may happen over a drink, or with a cup of coffee, disguised as triviality and sandwiched between two jokes, from the lips of a man or woman whom” we like or even admire. (And they will sound like Mrs. O’Brien.) We will be tempted to use the power of this place for our own comfort or security. We will be tempted to protect the powerful rather than the vulnerable. (See Penn State.) We will be tempted to think that we are special, that the rules do not apply to us, that the ends justify the means. We will be tempted to trust in the love of power rather than the power of love. We will be tempted to test God by making God nothing more than the one who blesses our own agendas and catches us when we fall.

Power brings temptation. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But thank God there was one who, though tempted in every way as we are, was without sin. There was one who was trustworthy enough to be entrusted with the power of God: who had the power to faithfully use power. For, though being in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but instead emptied himself. He lived by more than bread alone. He bowed before God and served only him. He did not put his Lord God to the test. Instead, entitled to wear the purple of a king, he took the form of a slave, and became obedient unto death: even death on a cross.

On that cross, the tempter’s voice would speak again, this time through a sneering crowd: “You saved others, now save yourself. Since you are the Son of God, leap down from the cross: jump.” But he doesn’t come down. Instead he bears and forgives. Only then, from that torturous pinnacle, will he make the ultimate leap of faith down into the valley of the shadow of death, trusting that he will not dash his foot against a stone: “Father, into your hands, I commend my Spirit.”

Plan B.

Three days later, Jesus will emerge from his cave, having passed not only through the wilderness of temptation, but even the wilderness of death.

That is power.

Thanks be to God. Amen.