

February 25, 2007

Luke 4:1-13

Sermon: “What Jesus Is NOT!”

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Text: “[*Jesus*] was tempted by the devil.”

Immediately after Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan, we are told that the Holy Spirit led him “*into the wilderness,*” where he was tempted by the devil. Don’t you find it interesting that immediately after Jesus receives the Holy Spirit, he is led into the wilderness and to the devil?

Maybe you think that the Holy Spirit should always bring only peace and comfort and assurance? Only Satisfaction, and joy, and good feelings? Not for Jesus. The Holy Spirit led him onto the wilderness where he was tried and tested and tempted. There, in the wilderness, far from civilization and all the creaturely comforts, there, Jesus bumps into Satan. Do you think this suggests that when you and I receive the Holy Spirit we ought to expect to bump into Satan, and the works of Satan? I think so – but that’s another sermon.

In the wilderness Satan makes Jesus a number of tempting offers. He doesn't attack him, or abuse him, or insult him. He just offers him gifts. And they're pretty good gifts!

Satan offers him *bread*. Jesus has been hungry for forty days, a very long time. What is more basic, or more necessary to life, than bread? Much of human creativity is tied to the making of bread, earning a living, so that we even call our money "bread." We have lived through an incredibly affluent time in America, and lots of people have made lots of "bread." These days, bread is money.

And what is Jesus' response to Satan's offer of bread? He says, "No thanks; not interested."

Then Satan offers *power* to Jesus. He says that if Jesus will just pay him tribute, if he will simply render appropriate homage, he can have power over all the kingdoms of the world. Just like that. Because Satan is in control of such things. He is the prince of the present age, and so he can offer this kind of power to Jesus.

I think it's interesting that Satan isn't offering Jesus lust, or greed, or any bad thing. He's offering him power, which can be a good thing. Sometimes bad, sometimes good – but think what power would be like in the hands of Jesus. That would have to be a good thing, right?

And have you ever known anybody who wanted power in order to do bad things? Power is always given for good things, positive things, noble things, like “economic development” or “self-determination” or “the spread of democracy” or “power to the people” or “women’s liberation” or “church reform” or some other noble-sounding objective.

We certainly live in a culture that values power. Because most of us have bread and enough to spare, and so we spend much of our time trying to get more power. We want power to live our lives as we please, to choose the things we want to choose, make the kind of choices we want to make. Power lets us do these things.

And we admire people who have power and who know how to use it: The Ted Turners and Donald Trumps, the Martha

Stewarts and Oprah Winfreys. And we show contempt for those who have had power and somehow lost it, for leaders who seem power less: The Jim Bakkers and the Jim Blacks, the Jimmy Carters and John Kerrys.

Satan offers Jesus all the power he could possibly want – over every kingdom and every authority – and what does Jesus say? “No way!”

Finally, maybe sensing the sort of person Jesus really is, Satan offers him religion. And why not? Having failed at bread and power, Satan tries religion. Spiritual pizzazz! Jesus, throw yourself down from that tower over there and you’re gonna see something special, something spectacular. Prime-time religion. Angels will appear as if out of nowhere, and they’ll catch you before you fall. Wouldn’t that be impressive!

There’s lots of interest these days in spectacular religion. Religion that works. Religion that’s useful. I mean, we spend so much time trying to get health and happiness through bread or through political power, why not use religion in the same way?

Isn't religion a good thing? Wouldn't it be a good thing to have so much faith that if you threw yourself off a cliff, you wouldn't have to worry about hurting or even killing yourself?

And yet, even this appeal was lost on Jesus, because he said, flat-out, "No, never!"

Don't you find it interesting that Jesus is known first of all, not by the things he affirms but by the things he refuses? Remember, this episode with the devil happens at the beginning of his ministry. This is the first time we've seen Jesus in action in Luke's Gospel. These are the first words we hear from Jesus as an adult. And the first word from him is "no." No!

A very small word, but *Oh!* So revealing. You and I usually want to know what a person believes in before we ask what he *doesn't* believe in. We're more interested in what a person wants to do rather than in what she refuses to do. And yet, here, in the beginning Jesus is known to us by what he rejects rather than in what he affirms. Before even his first sermon or lecture, before he

begins his earthly ministry, he utters that simple little word that carries so much weight: “No!”

Luke tells us that after Satan has been rebuffed these three times, he simply slinks away and “waits until a more opportune time.” That sounds pretty ominous. When will that time be? When will Jesus be in the wilderness again, or hungry, or alone, or vulnerable?

For now, I want us to look a little more closely at those three things that he renounces. In doing so, Jesus puts himself at odds with three of the most cherished possessions in our culture – money, power, and religion.

More than that, Jesus pits himself against the entire disposition of modern culture. Because our favorite slogan, today, is not “No!” but “Yes!” “Yes! You can do it.” “Go for it!” “Grab all that you can in life!” “Just do it!” “You deserve it!”

We believe more in Yes than we do in No, don’t we? We think of ourselves as consumers, first, before we think of being brothers and sisters, fellow citizens, and friends. If we want

something, we consider it our God-given right to get it. And if we can have it, we have the right to take it, don't we? Don't deny yourself. Don't give up. Just do it. Just say "Yes."

During my seminary days, I had a friend named Bruce who was studying for the ministry. He also had a PhD in mathematics from the University of Washington, and was working on a second PhD in physics at Princeton when he felt the call to ministry. He told me that many of his colleagues were flabbergasted, and even annoyed with him, that he should be squandering his talents, and turning his back on a career that would do so much good, in order to waste his time serving God as a minister in the church.

Our culture thinks more of people who say yes than those who say no.

When Jesus meets up with Satan he resists him, not by using the devil's weapons of violence and coercion and physical force, but by speaking the simple, unalloyed truth – the word of God. He quoted Scripture. Luke tells us the scriptures that Jesus quoted, and

they're very interesting. But mainly, all of this Scripture can be summed up in the little word, *No!* Jesus said no to Satan

Do you know anyone who has turned his or her back on the world and all the trappings of the world? Those people can be a real threat to the world and to those of us who too easily value the things of the world. And yet, sometimes we have an odd sort of attraction to them because they seem so out of sorts with our value system that puts great emphasis in worldly opinion.

When my high school best friend Steve got married in San Diego 31 years ago, he asked me to be his best man. And as his best man, I was expected to give a toast at the reception. Now, Steve married the daughter of a federal court judge, and so there were many dignitaries at the wedding reception, including the mayor of San Diego. I knew that at that time Steve was thinking of the possibility of ordained ministry or some other profession in the church, because he wanted to give his life in service to God in some capacity.

In the toast I mentioned all this, and then kind of held my breath, knowing that the crowd had been drinking for some time, and that there were so many political movers and shakers there who might not understand why Steve would even consider going into such a profession, instead of trying to get a job making lots of money using his father-in-law's connections.

To my surprise, after a rather lengthy hush came over the crowd, the drummer in the band spoke up and said (in typical California fashion), "Hey, man, I can dig it. Like that's the coolest thing I've ever heard."

"Cool?"

"Yeah, cool." He told me later during a break in the music. Because how many people wouldn't use family connections to get a job making lots of money, but instead would see their future in working through the church to teach children how to love and serve God? Not too many. Just one person with the strength to sound off and say the little word *no*, becomes incredibly

interesting. Even to the movers and the shakers and the money-makers.

This morning we begin our journey with Jesus toward the cross. And Satan is still waiting for a more opportune time. The battle isn't over. In fact, with Jesus saying *No* the battle's just beginning. This story reminds us that Jesus was sent to the cross not simply because of who he was, but because of what he said and did. More to the point, he was put on the cross because of what he refused to say and do. He died because he said *No!*

And let's be honest: Something in Jesus both attracts us and repulses us. We're afraid of someone who takes everything that is offered him – everything we love and cherish and covet – and turns it down, renounces it, refuses it all. That scares us.

And when this same Jesus turns to us and asks us to do the same – to take up our crosses and follow him each day – we wonder what that's going to mean for us. What's it going to require of us? And, surprisingly, the same temptations that

afflicted Jesus are those that afflict us today: Money, power, and religion.

Are we strong enough to say No? If Satan was waiting for a more opportune time to strike back at Jesus, ever wonder when your “more opportune time” will come?

Let me suggest that that time may be when you least expect it. It may come at a time when you are offered something that seems so right, so self-evidently good, that there’s no need to even question its value. It will probably be something that most average Americans think is good. Satan may even quote Scripture in your ear just as he did to Jesus. And you’ll be tempted to say yes, and to affirm all that the brightest and the best among us recommend. You may even reach down, and not have the strength to say anything but yes. But later, when you realize how much this decision has really cost you, you’ll realize that this has been Satan’s “opportune time.”

Or, maybe you’ll remember this story. You may not be able to quote Scripture as Jesus did, or to come up with an articulate

theological response for your decision. But you can offer one little word. That little word will be “No.” And it will be word enough.