

What Jesus Renounces - Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11
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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Paul O. Boger, Sr.

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Last Sunday we recalled that the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke say that, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. We noted that the Gospel of John makes no reference to this event at all. We spent time discussing the concept of Satan, or more appropriately, the reality of evil in our lives and world. We said that evil exists whether we put a name or face to it or not.

The account of Jesus' Temptations is the traditional passage for opening the Lenten Season.

What we have in the temptations of Jesus is conflict. Conflict between Jesus and evil, Satan, or the devil.

We remain with the temptations of Christ today and look at Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' and his encounter with evil, Satan, in the wilderness.

Note how Luke begins our gospel reading today, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit..."

Here we have two references to the Holy Spirit in one sentence. Matthew and Luke only have one.

Also note that in all three gospels, this episode with Satan in the wilderness occurs immediately after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove upon him and there is a voice saying in Luke: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In Matthew the words are, "This is my Son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased."

Often we think that the gift of God's Spirit leads someone toward peace, satisfaction, joy, and good feeling.

Not for Jesus.

The gift of the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. There, in the wilderness, far from the city, from the support of others, and the comforts of civilization, Jesus is encountered by Satan.

This suggests to me that people who receive the Spirit ought to expect to be encountered by Satan! But that is another sermon.

In the wilderness, Satan makes Jesus a number of tempting offers. Satan does not attack Jesus, assault him, or abuse him. Rather, he offers him gifts. And they are good gifts.

Satan offers him bread.

Jesus has been hungry for forty days, a very long time. What gift is more basic, or necessary for life than bread? Most of us spend most of our day working for bread. Most of human creativity is tied to economic production. And, most of us North Americans, even in the current economic recession, live incredibly affluent lives compared to most in the world. We have a lot of bread.

What is Jesus' response to Satan's offer of bread?

He refuses.

Next, Satan offers Jesus power.

Satan tells him that, if Jesus would just pay him appropriate homage, he can have power over all of the kingdoms of this world. Satan is in charge of such power. Though that observation is a bit discomfoting (Satan is in charge of politics!), still, power is a good thing. Satan is not

offering Jesus lust, or greed, or any bad thing. Satan is offering Jesus a good thing -- power. And of course power in Jesus' hands would surely be power to do good. Come to think of it, have you ever known anybody who said that he or she wanted power in order to do bad things? Power is always given for noble things like "economic development" or "national self-determination" or "power to the people" or "the liberation of women" or "the reform of the church" or some other noble objective.

We certainly live in a culture that values power. Because, for most of us, we have bread and enough and to spare, we spend much of our time trying to get more power. We want power to live our lives as we please, to make the choices that we want to make. We admire people who have power and know how to use it. We have contempt for leaders who seem powerless. Satan offers Jesus all the power one could want -- power over every kingdom in the world.

And Jesus refuses. Jesus says, "No!"

Then, Satan offers Jesus religion.

Perhaps Satan is beginning to sense the sort of person Jesus is. Having failed at bread and power, two commodities which are so self-evidently ambiguous and prone to abuse, Satan offers Jesus religion. Spiritual showbiz. Throw yourself down from the tower and there will be spectacular religious results. Angels will catch you.

There is a great deal of interest in our day in such spectacular religion, religion that works. We spend so much of our time trying to secure health and happiness through bread or through political power, why not use religion in the same way? We have so many different paths to get what we want - hard work, therapy, the acquisition of stocks and bonds, why not religion? Isn't religion a good thing? Would it not be a good thing to have so

much faith that one could jump off a cliff, confident of divine protection?

And yet, even when faced with Satan's offer for spiritual heroics, Jesus says, "No!"

Don't you find it interesting that Jesus is first known to us not by the things he affirms, or the actions he accomplishes, but rather in what he renounces?

I want us to realize that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke Gospel, the first time we see Jesus in action is here, when he is tempted.

This event is the very beginning.

These are the first words we hear from the adult Jesus.

And this first word is "no."

No is a very small word, but oh how revealing!

We usually want to know what a person believes in, rather than what that person doesn't believe in. We are first of all most interested in what a person will do rather than what the person refuses to do. And yet, at the beginning, Jesus is known by what he rejects rather than what he affirms. Before Jesus preaches or teaches, he utters a simple little word, "No!" He tells us what he renounces.

Unlike Matthew or Mark, Luke is the only gospel writer who says that, after these three renunciations by Jesus, Satan slinks away and waits "until a more opportune time."

That sounds ominous.

When will that opportune time be?

When will Jesus again be in the wilderness, hungry, alone, and vulnerable?

For now, here is an occasion for us to consider all that we know about Jesus on the basis of that which he renounces. In his three

renunciations, Jesus is at odds with three of the most cherished possessions of our culture:

--money (possessions)

--power and

--religion.

Note how Jesus is at odds with the entire disposition of our culture.

Our favorite slogan is not "No!"

Our favorite slogans are things like:

"Go for it!"

"Got to have it!"

"You deserve it!"

"Yes!"

"Just do it!"

We believe in affirmation rather than renunciation. We think of ourselves not primarily as citizens, or sisters and brothers, but as consumers. If we want it, we have the duty to do everything possible to get it. And if we can have it, we have a responsibility to take it.

Don't deny thyself. Learn to say, "Yes!"

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

When Jesus was confronted by Satan, he resisted Satan, not with Satan's weapons of violence, coercion, or physical force. All he did was speak to Satan. He resisted only with words, the word, **No**.

He quoted Scripture.

Matthew and Luke tell us the Scripture that Jesus quoted and the various quotes he uses are interesting. But mainly, all of this Scripture can be summed up in the little word, no!

Jesus said no to Satan.

Do you know someone who has turned his or her back on this world and all that it has to offer?

Such people can be a real threat to this world and to those of us who may have too easily surrendered too much to this world. And yet, sometimes we are attracted to such people and their ability to renounce.

On this Sunday we begin our walk with Jesus toward the cross. Satan is now waiting for a more opportune time. The battle is not over; in fact, with Jesus' renunciation the battle is just beginning.

The incident of Jesus' temptations should make us fast forward to the cross. Jesus was sent to the cross not simply because he was the Son of God and people were threatened by that. Jesus was sent to the cross because of what he said and did. He was not some robot who was born only to walk toward the cross and die for our sins. Rather, he was put on the cross because of what he said and did. Or more to the point of today's incident of Jesus' temptation, he was put on the cross for what he refused to say and do. He was put on the cross for saying no!

Something in Jesus both repels us and attracts us.

We are frightened by one who is offered everything we love, all that we worship and are giving our lives for, and yet still renounces and refuses all of that.

Yet, there is something about Jesus that also attracts us, even in his ability to renounce.

And we, who are urged to follow Jesus by taking up his cross daily and following him, wonder what this means for us. It is surprising that the temptations which beset Jesus are the same as our temptations.

Satan offered Jesus the same commodities that we are offered. He

was able to stand up to his full moral height and say no.

Would we be strong enough to do the same?

Satan is now waiting for a more "opportune time" to assault Jesus with more temptation. We wonder when our "more opportune time" will come.

I have a suggestion about that time. This story suggests that Satan's "opportune time" is that time when we are offered something that seems so right, so self-evidently good, that there is no need even to question its value. It will be something that nine out of ten average Americans think is good. Satan may even quote Scripture to us just as he quoted Scripture to Jesus! And we will be tempted to say yes, to affirm all that is brightest and best within us. We may reach down, and not have the resources to say anything but yes.

Later, when we realize how much this decision has cost us, we will realize that this has truly been Satan's "opportune time."

Or, when the "opportune time comes," we may remember this story. And though we may not be able, like Jesus, have just the right verse of Scripture on the tip of our tongue, while we may not be able to fully articulate the theological rationale for our decision, we will be able to offer one little word. That little word will be "no." It will be word enough.

In Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," remember when it says, "The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him, one little word shall fell him."

What is that "one little word"? I have always assumed the one little word so devastating and defeating to Satan was the word, the name "Jesus." Now I wonder if the little word that defeats Satan is even simpler.

That little word, uttered in the name of Jesus, is NO!