How to say, “No”

A Meditation on Matthew 4: 1 – 11

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When I imagine this Gospel story, this story of Jesus and the Confuser, the Tempter, the Evil One, I see Jesus sitting alone, leaning against a rock, a snake whispering into his ear. That strange, sometimes amusing image of a red creature with pitchfork, horns and tail, the melting pot of images that comes to us from the book of Revelation, Greek mythology and modern imagination, is not present in this story. I would imagine, if Jesus were to encounter a Temptor, it would come in some form that would make sense for that context. Why wouldn’t it come as a snake, that creature that God cursed for misleading Eve and Adam? Why wouldn’t it come as a boa or viper, a whip snake or racer, any one of the wild creatures that dwell in the Palestinian wilderness? A snake, coiled on the warm rock, poised to whisper in Jesus’ ear.

However Jesus heard this voice, however this Confuser appeared, it grossly misread the situation. The Confuser assumed Jesus was lonely. He was not. The Confuser assumed Jesus’ physical needs would outweigh his spiritual needs. They would not. The Confuser assumed that Jesus’ desire for power would overwhelm his intrinsic humility. It would not. Jesus wasn’t fooled. Jesus could see through each of the temptations that the evil one offered.

This dynamic story is given to us, not that we should feel guilty that we are not perfect, but to comfort us with the knowledge that Jesus has walked where we walk. From that walk, Jesus’ has immense compassion for us. From that experience – and not only in the wilderness -but throughout his life – Jesus knows in the depths of his soul, how difficult it is to navigate this imperfect, broken world. Jesus knows how easy it is to simply give in, give up, conform to what the world expects.

Here are two ways to approach this story. I hope one of them might offer you hope and encouragement as we travel the Lenten road to Easter.

The first perspective is that the Confuser invites Jesus into a game of proving things that can only be known through faith, a game Jesus doesn’t fall for.

* The challenge of changing stones to bread is the challenge to Jesus to prove who he is. Prove that you are the bread of life. Prove that you are the miracle maker. Prove – without an audience to witness it – that you are God. Prove to yourself.
* The dare on the top of the Temple mount is the dare to prove who God is. Is God really the rescuer? Is God truly your salvation? Does God fulfill God’s promises? Prove who God is.
* The final challenge, the invitation to worship all that is not God, in order to rule the world? How much falsehood can the evil one sell? The world is not his to give. Here, it is a matter of disproving who the evil one claims to be.

But none of these are concepts that can be proven or disproven. They are matters of faith and belief. Jesus did not need to prove who he was to himself or anyone else. If he wanted bread in the wilderness, God would provide, as God did for the Israelites, manna from heaven. Jesus didn’t need to prove himself, Jesus simply needed to be himself. Walking with Jesus is a matter of faith. It’s not about facts and figures and data. It’s about trust, and soul-tending, and the most basic elements of loving one another.

Nor did Jesus need to prove who God is. Even if Jesus had done a swan dive off the Temple, and been caught ever so beautifully by a team of angels, it wouldn’t have proven anything. Those who witnessed it would have been believed by some, dismissed by others. Jesus would have been taunted and challenged to do it again and again and again, exhausting the angels, and wearying God. We don’t prove God’s existence. We can lean in to it, or we can take a leap of faith, but we can’t prove it.

And to give credence to the fallacy that evil rules the world? Why would Jesus do that? Again, not something that can be proven: which is greater, evil or good? When we look around us, at the brokenness of this world, we could easily be persuaded that evil has the upper hand. This was the question with which Jesus knew humanity would wrestle: is evil the dominant force in the world? Each of us, in some way, holds power in this world: will we use that power selfishly or unselfishly? We have the power to heal or to harm: what will we do?

That is one way to explore this text: considering how Jesus did not fall into a trap of misconception, a trap of thinking that proving himself, proving God, disproving the power of evil in the world would be the answer. There is freedom in knowing that it is also *not up to us* to prove or disprove who Jesus is or who – *or if* - God is. It is not up to us to prove or disprove the power of evil in the world. As it was for Jesus, so it is for us. Our walk is our witness. Unlike Jesus, we will have moments, days, seasons of failure when it comes to walking in faith. The flip side is that our failures do not disprove God’s presence. Our failures do not disprove Jesus’ experiences, teachings or promises.

Here’s a second way of exploring this story, and it comes to us from Kyle Childress of the Eklesia project. Childress writes:

*Satan, the Great Deceiver, shows up to steer Jesus away from God’s call upon him and uses three of the greatest temptations for those who want to change this world: economics/money – turning stones to bread; religion – spectacular religion which will make the crowds want to follow you anywhere; and politics – to get the power to make things turn out the way you want.*

Economics, religion, politics. Things we sometimes avoid discussing in polite company or perhaps around the Thanksgiving dinner table. Not subjects Jesus avoided. Economic injustice and political systems that oppress rather than sustain: these were things he abhorred. And religion? Kind of goes without saying, right?

The reason that Jesus refused these temptations, suggests Childress, is that the deceiver wanted Jesus to embrace economics, religion and politics separate from God. “Without God,” writes Childress, “economics, religion, and politics can be twisted into something that is the opposite of God’s intentions. Economics and politics apart from God? We are very accustomed to that. We are witnessing the suffering of the impoverished increase. We are exposed daily on a local and national level to the voices of politicians who claim to be Christian, yet make decisions devoid of Christian compassion, wisdom or morals.

But *religion* devoid of God? That’s a hard truth that encompasses the abuses of the church from its earliest days to today. So many examples in our own country - the disrespect and abuse of indigenous peoples, of African peoples, of Jewish peoples. The neglect or abuse of children and youth, of those who have apparent or non-apparent disabilities, of women, of LGBTQ+ individuals, of undocumented immigrants…the list goes on. Religion devoid of compassion. Religion devoid of forgiveness. But more than that: religion devoid of risk and creativity. Religion limited by narrow-mindedness. Religion devoid of God.

The method behind the deceiver’s argument, Childress notes, is decontextualization. We could also call this “proof texting,” taking a scripture completely out of its context and using it for whatever purpose we choose. The danger in decontextualization, is that it allows us to use scripture for unholy purposes. The abstraction allows us to forget the original truth. As an example, Childress sites an exploration of the Rodney King trial from Stanley Fish’s book, The Trouble With Principle. You remember the story from 1991 - King was beaten by five police officers and it was caught on amateur video. The defense slowed down the footage and examined it frame by frame. Each individual blow, apart from the others did not look like excessive force, did not appear to be intended to kill or maim. The big picture, the context was blurred, erased. King suffered skull fractures, multiple broken bones, and other physical and emotional traumas, but the officers were acquitted.

We are a danger to ourselves, to others, to Christ’s church, when we abstract God’s Word for our own purposes. Jesus saw through what the evil one was doing. Or, as Childress writes: “As far as the Evil One is concerned, you can quote the Bible, do social action, and even put the Ten Commandments in the courthouse and the schoolhouse, just keep the God we know in Jesus Christ out.”

May God grant us the strength to say “no” when the world tries to tangle us up in arguments about proving God’s existence; those arguments will only deplete our energy for doing God’s work. And may God grant us the wisdom to see through the temptation to decontextualize, to demean God’s truths.

Much of what we have explored today can be captured by the words of a familiar Franciscan Blessing:

May God bless you with a restless **discomfort**

about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,

so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy **anger**

at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,

so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of **tears**

to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish,

so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them

and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough **foolishness**

to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,

so that you are able, with God’s grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Sources cited: <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2011/03/god-abstracted/Kyle> Childress