

021713 Lent 1C

“Rejecting Power, Rejecting Evil” Rev. Seth D. Jones

Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a time of the church year when we honor and model Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness where he resisted temptations. When we participate in Lent, hopefully we remember the actions we take, the insights we receive and the practices we incorporate into our lives are meant to infiltrate and alter our whole year. Lent, like Advent, like Christmas, like Easter, like Pentecost is meant to transform us and change us, making us good and holy food, strong and committed shepherds and humble, trusting followers of God.

During these next five weeks or so, we will explore the nature of God’s power and our relationship to power as Christians. How do we become an empowered people and church in the world? How does Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit empower us? During Lent this year, we celebrate our 175th year as a church in the Rockland community. We have been a source of giving, support and worship for a long time here, and we live in a day and age when the ways of church and faith are changing radically. How do we remain empowered and yet change and follow in the ways the Lord would wish of us? These are some of the operating questions I set before you for this Lenten and Easter season.

It is important, I think, to begin with some working understandings about *power*, since that is the focus of our Lenten journey. I want to be clear that I am working through these things with you, so my definitions and ideas are working models and subject to change over the course of our exploration. As it is right now, we can base some of our understandings of power on our readings for today.

Notice Jesus’ second temptation in our reading today:

*And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, 6 and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”*

We are given some valuable information here. Worldly power, human power, earthly power, in its political and cultural sense, is under the control and authority of the devil. To seek worldly power is to, essentially, seek to worship evil. So there is worldly power and there is divine power. Jesus, the representative of divine power on earth, rejects worldly power. He says, instead:

*And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”*

The nature of divine power is the rejection of human power. Divine power has something to do with a complete commitment to serving only God and God alone, which, if we follow the trajectory of Jesus Christ to the Cross and through to the Resurrection, means being at odds with earthly power.

Our discussion of power, based on Luke 4, also requires us to understand some things about the nature of evil as well. For Jesus and for us, this means acknowledging that evil has power. Evil seeks power and feeds on it. Evil has a personal investment in our choices and determinations. In the movie ‘Constantine’, a movie about a demon hunter, John Constantine has a conversation with a woman who is also a ‘seer’. They are having a discussion on the street after demons try to attack her. John tells her about the war between demons and angels and how we are their pawns. The woman, Angela, says, “*Well, this has been very educational...but I don’t*

*believe in the devil.*” John Constantine responds, saying, *“You should. He believes in you.”* Evil cares about you, personally, and, as God tells Cain, it sniffs and creeps at the cracks of your door (Gen 4:7). God tells Cain that sin’s desire is to dominate you.

Regardless of whether you choose to personalize evil as Satan and the devil, or you have a more nuanced, spiritualized view of evil, it is important to understand that it exists. Further, evil requires power in order to have power. Evil is easy to identify when it is blatant and extreme. We have seen plenty of that in the past few years, especially with school shootings and terrorism. That is easy to see. CS Lewis says, as he references ancient theologians, this is simply humans being human. Blatant evil is not the work of the demonic and satanic. The work of the demonic and satanic is much more subtle.

The subtle and constant work of evil is in the arts of deception, flattery and duplicity. Evil deceives and makes us believe that slaking our personal thirst and hunger is more important than doing the same for others. This is the first temptation Jesus faces. The deception that physical hunger is the most important food for Jesus. Jesus knows better, though. He knows that if the hungry are to be fed, they cannot be fed by the fulfillment of our personal hunger. Spiritual food leads to physical food for those in need. *“Humanity does not survive by bread alone”*, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6.

Flattery is the craft of telling people what they want to hear in order to get what you want. It is always easier to get people to do the work you want done by telling them how great they are, how powerful they are, how talented they are. Further, no one else is capable of achieving the results you seek than the one you flatter to do the work for you. Who else but Jesus would be more capable of ruling the world? The Son of God overseeing the kingdoms of the world would be an incredible thing, wouldn’t it? Except for a small loophole, and a very important loophole. As we said earlier, who holds the power of earthly kingdoms? The devil himself. The only requirement for worldly power, the only cost, is to whom you grant authority. The only requirement for Jesus, or any of us, to rule with earthly power is to bow down before Satan and grant him all authority. This Jesus rejects as well. *“You shall love the Lord your God and serve the Lord alone”*, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6 again.

Duplicity is the art of presenting one thing in the form of another in order that you might increase the scope of gain for oneself. Duplicity deals with the world of appearances and the manipulation of ideas and images in order to achieve a particular end. How things appear is far more important than how things are. It is the foundation of what is called ‘magical thinking’. An example of magical thinking would be, for instance, that God causes disasters because people behave a particular way. When Katrina hit New Orleans, Pat Robertson said God was punishing the country for gays, liberals and I don’t know what else. This is magical thinking. He himself is attempting to manipulate images and appearances for some kind of gain. This is what I think is going on in Jesus’ last temptation. The devil wants Jesus to make himself to appear as a magical being for the people of Jerusalem; Overwhelm them with the contravening of physical laws and then hold out the promise that all can achieve some kind of control over the natural laws God has put in place. In other words, the devil is asking Jesus and us to reject creation itself. *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test”*, Jesus says, quoting Deuteronomy 8.

Divine power is expressed in Luke at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry as rejection of human power and the rejection of evil. This is the foundation of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ ministry begins in temptation and the confrontation of evil. And so it is with us. In our baptism, in our welcome into the family of faith in Jesus Christ, we promise to *“renounce the powers of evil and desire to know the freedom of new life in Jesus Christ”*.

We also promise to “*follow the example of our Savior Jesus Christ, resisting oppression and evil, showing love and justice, and witnessing the work and word of God as best as we are able.*”

Like Jesus, our lives of faith begin in temptation and resistance to evil. A life of faith presumes temptation and evil to be always present. In fact, based on our personal experience and Jesus’ example to us, we cannot legitimately be participating in the faith *unless* we are being tempted and faced with evil and oppression. Lent provides an opportunity for us to seek out the depths and subtleness of evil and temptation in our lives. This is not a bad thing. If they are present and you are being challenged by them, it means your faith is growing and working.

What we will begin to discover when we accept the challenge of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness is that we cannot overpower evil and temptation with human power. Human power, it seems to me, is most often a top-down exercise, an imposition by force - either direct or indirect - to achieve personal and self-interested gains. If I cannot get what I want by a direct approach, I am not sure I have the ability to not resort to deception, flattery and duplicity to get what I want. This is why during Lent we are called to remove ourselves and allow ourselves to be confronted directly by our own fallenness, brokenness and sinfulness. And then we come together to worship, praise and allow ourselves to receive the provision, power and protection of God and God alone.

God-oriented power exhibits itself in our commitment to God and our trust in God. It is most understood by the image of the Good Shepherd. When confronted with personal needs, like Jesus was confronted with the temptation of hunger in the wilderness, we remember and trust that “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” When we are confronted with the need for power and control, which is the definition of the modern American, just as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, we remember, that the Lord “*leads me in ways of righteousness for his name’s sake.*” In God’s shepherding and leadership, we fear no evil. We are comforted by the sight of his rod and staff. When the temptation to overcome the natural laws of the universe for my own benefit and to impress others, just as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, we remember what we trust as God’s people - that “*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*”

So human power is the seeking of more power and control by whatever means necessary to achieve my own ends. God-oriented power exhibits itself in the rejection of human power and in the rejection of evil. God-oriented power looks like shepherding and looks like Jesus’ journey to the Cross. It is an act of complete trust and commitment to God and God’s vision for us. In ancient Greece and in Hebrew thought, the wilderness and the desert were symbolic of chaotic, directionless, unsettled ways. What grounds us in this chaotic, wild place, which is really our daily lives in Christ? Paul says in Romans 10 that the faith which grounds us is that “*the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart, because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*”

Salvation, then, is trusting God will provide our daily bread for us, and yet we know that we do not survive on daily bread alone, and instead have life because of the breath of God within us. Salvation is trusting God is the true ruler of the world, the one true power of all things, and yet we know that we suffer earthly authorities, powers and principalities and instead serve God and God alone. Salvation is trusting God to protect us in a world where natural laws are always in effect, sometimes to our benefit, sometimes to our destruction, and yet we know that we are protected in our deepest being because of God’s love for us.

So let us during Lent allow ourselves to grow in our faith by not fearing temptation and evil. Let us instead learn to trust and commit to the God who provides, who gives and holds power and who protects all living things.

Let us resist the temptation to take power and control ourselves and others. Let us resist our temptation to seek only our own provision. And let us resist the temptation to constantly find ways to overcome the fundamental laws of the universe in order to become better, stronger and more powerful than others. Let us instead trust that God knows what God is doing and commit to the leadership of the Good Shepherd who leads us to the Cross and from the Cross to Resurrection and new life, and from new life into a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit, by God's grace and Christ's love.