

March 6, 2022

LENT I – The Use and Misuse of Scripture and Power

Luke 4:1-13

The devil lies.

Jesus knew the devil was lying.

God never lies.

Sometimes preachers are too smart for our own good. We can go on and on about stuff that never enters people's minds. I think we forget the basics at times. We think that people already know the basic stuff, so we don't bring it up. We talk about all kinds of subjects that don't amount to a hill of beans. This morning, I want to talk the basics.

The devil lies. God never lies. If you want to know the truth, listen to Jesus.

First we need to understand that this is a war. This is not a spiritual retreat. This is not Jesus getting in touch with his feelings. This is not Jesus discovering his inner feminine spirit or his true masculinity. This is not a sojourn in the wilderness where God lays this really big lesson on Jesus, and then Jesus comes back and tells his society, "I have learned a valuable lesson. God wants us to love one another." No. That's not what happened here. Jesus was told a pack of lies by the devil; he recognized them as lies; he refused the lies. This is not Sunday school; this is war.

In the cosmic sense, the Devil vs. Jesus is all-out war. And you should know, the devil never makes for peace. War does not make for peace. There's a rogue nation disrupting world peace this morning – Russia. Rogue Russia directed by one of the world's devils – Putin. Rooting tooting shooting Putin. He's trying to bomb Ukraine into submission. As I pray for Ukraine and Russia, I can hear the voice of the only conservative politician I have ever truly admired: Winston Churchill. I can hear his voice above the Nazi bombs falling, falling, falling on London. I can hear him putting spirit and resolve in the British with his soaring rhetoric. We will never, never, never, never give up. I hope the spirit of Churchill speaks again today in Ukraine. We tried to bomb North Vietnam into submission; we failed. We tried it again in Afghanistan; we failed. The Russians tried it there; they failed.

Have you seen that long table that Putin has where he sits at the head and all his cabinet members are down at the other end – way down at the other end? This man has issues, complexes, insecurities. The nations of the world need to gather on the borders of Russia and insist that this war stop. The devil, militaries, dictators, rulers, presidents do not make for peace. There are some Americans attracted to Putin because the devil is always enticing. Some of those Putin lovers are members of the American media. Yesterday Russia completely censored and shut down any notion of free press. Imagine going to jail in America for 15 years for spouting opinions on television. We would have to build bigger jails to hold all the humbugs.

And the devil is attempting to make sure that his defeat of Jesus will maintain the world's warring ways forever. This is the Prince of Darkness vs. the Prince of Peace. "Military might does not make for peace; war does not make for peace. Occupying somebody else's country doesn't make for peace. Killing those that fought to protect their own homes does not make for peace. Press conferences claiming victory do not make for peace. Regime change, substituting one tyrant for another tyrant with the

biggest tyrant pulling the puppet strings of all the tyrants, that does not make for peace! Colonizing a country does not make for peace! If you don't believe me, look at Haiti, look at Puerto Rico, look at Angola, look at Zimbabwe, look at Kenya, look at Afghanistan, look at Iraq. Look at Ukraine. Colonization does not make for peace. Occupation does not make for peace, and subjugation only makes for temporary silence. It does not make for peace."

The devil is clear-eyed about Jesus and his mission. He knows what is at stake, and he intends to shut it down before it gets rolling. Jesus' own people missed the meaning of the mission, the world missed it, but Satan knew that Jesus had come to redeem the world and he resolved to stop it.

The devil will do anything, say anything to stop Jesus. The devil lies. The devil is the liar; Jesus is the truth-teller. The devil tells 3 lies – I'm talking audacious, bold whoppers.

Lie #1: I will give you power to turn stones into bread. Jesus refused the lie. After all, Jesus had already turned water into wine and fed 5,000 people.

Lie #2: I will give you authority over all the kingdoms of this world. Jesus refused the lie.

Lie #3: I will make sure you do not die. Jesus refused the lie.

Do you see that lying is the devil's strategic weapon? This is what he has to go with when his back is against the wall. The devil lies. People who lie are of their father the devil. Now, I am not going to try to tell who is lying and who is telling the truth. I'm saying that lies are not the way to do business. You can discern the liars from the truth-tellers, but know that the devil is a liar and Jesus is the truth-teller.

I love this story because Jesus refuses to give in. We live in a give in culture, a get along and go along culture, a give up culture, a join the crowd culture, and little by little our real humanity leaks away from us. Not that we do anything awful, but that we give in and give up and give out a little bit every day until there's nothing of the real us left.

The Devil. The devil comes in many disguises. Forget the red guy with the pitchfork and tail. That's not a devil that can hurt us. Paul describes the devil in Ephesians 6: For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Chouraqui says, "A cursory reading of the Psalms offer a biblical reflection on evil. It is not long before we meet the Prince of Darkness on the path of wickedness. The Psalter provides him with a frightful identity card that includes no less than a hundred and twelve names, surnames, and title, and qualities. He is essentially the Racha', the one who is unable to face God's judgment, the Reprobate. He is the very entity of evil under all its various visages. He is the opulent, the wealthy, the despoiler, the worker of sin, the man oblivious to God; the oppressor, the adversary of peace. He is the Accuser. His name defines his works to good effect. The father of nothingness incarnates a radical inadequacy, and emptiness and his works are the perfect likeness of the one who fathers them – Satan. He every word consummates a lie; his every action, a deed of violence."

Governments can be the devil. Institutions can be the devil. Corporations can be the devil. The church can be the devil. Any place that embraces the violence, the greed, the lies, the envy, the pride, the sloth, the anger of Satan, is the devil incarnate. The devil is

the voice of threat and seduction that seek to talk us out of being the church. I think the voice is doing its dirty work quite well. Churches everywhere are giving up. They have been talked out of being the church. They have settled for being social organizations, places where people can have some fellowship, some food, and some company. But that is not the church. The devil talks us out of our courage, our fight, our faith, our resilience, our hope. The devil just talks and talks and talks.

The devil's lies come to nothing. The devil's lies lead to destruction and death. In the book of Proverbs there is a character who lies as a matter of course. This is what Lady Wisdom says about this liar: "There are six things which Yahweh hates, seven which he loathes: haughty eyes, a false tongue, and hands which shed innocent blood; a mind which devises evil plans, feet which run swiftly to evil; a perjurer, a false witness, one who initiates strife between brothers" This means that God has a lot of hatred loose in Russia today, in the US Congress today. God's hating on the violence, the lies, the ugliness, the meanness, the vulgar attacks. The word says God hates when people listen to lies and follow lies.

Proverbs warns us not to listen to the smooth words of the liar. The liar will distract us with copious charm, rout us with smooth words, and we will go like an ox to the slaughter, as a hart skips into a noose, as a bird speeds toward a trap, until an arrow pierces the liver.

When the devil enticed Jesus, wisdom was with him, the ancient wisdom of the Lady of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. The devil said, "Come with me and we will rule the world. Jesus held back his foot from the path of lies because he knew the devil's lies were the door to unending evil.

Jesus stored up wisdom's commandments, lending his ear to wisdom and his mind to discernment. Jesus stored up competence and discernment as a shield and as a guard to the paths of justice. He discerned the right and just, and straight, every good track!

Jesus rejected the one whose speech was twisted, who had forsaken straight paths to journey on ways of darkness, who took pleasure in evil-doing, who delighted in perversity.

No account of evil can be left simply to the devices of philosophy and rhetoric.

The way of evil is made clear in the Psalms. Narrow places, closed round about, darksome, muck, the snare, waters of destruction, ferocious beasts, death. This is the way of the Reprobate. "His every gesture is sketched from life, thanks to the trained eye of a contemplative who never loses sight of him: the hand that strikes and kills, the thrashing arm, the foot that crushes, the heel in flight, the gritted jaws; the cortege of pain and all its weapons; the threats hurled from high towers, walled fortifications, the wild abandoned howls, the look that burns with hatred. The Reprobate would never dream of surrender; still less would he think in terms of the institutions of government. Do what he may, the Racha is incapable of undertaking a lasting, permanent work. His sense of policy is defeated by a short attention span. While he thinks there are none worthy to oppose him, it is at last the Reprobate who is vanquished.

The evil person meets fierce resistance from the psalter: "He loves to curse, let curses come on him! He did not like blessing; may it be far from him! He clothed himself with cursing as his coat; may it soak into his body like water" (Psalm 109). He has lived in

the absurd and perishes in the absurd. While he has seemed to prosper, triumph, lord it over everyone, make his point, mock, demean, and overcome, it is an illusion. He will finally be left with nothing – “not even the bitterness of all the trouble he has had. He is the prisoner of nothingness; the tool of incisive justice imprisons him within himself; he is caught in the net he thought he could use to catch others. His negation brings him to naught; his hatred, his greasy fat suffocates him. The Rebel hands out contempt; contempt is what he gets. Cut off from love, he obtains only what emanates from himself. “He amasses wealth: the result will be nakedness, hunger, thirst. He believes only in himself. He is left with the judgment of Psalm 49. “Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish. Such is the fate of the foolhardy, the end of those who are pleased with their lot. Selah. Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. Selah. Do not be afraid when some become rich, when the wealth of their houses increases.

For when they die, they will carry nothing away; their wealth will not go down after them. Though in their lifetime they count themselves happy—for you are praised when you do well for yourself—they will go to the company of their ancestors, who will never again see the light. Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish.”

The psalter shows no mercy for the reprobate. The metaphors beat against the doors of the kingdom of evil, unrelenting in their terror. God appears to exercise justice on behalf of the widow and the orphan, to liberate those who love him from the kingdom of darkness. The earth trembles, the mountains quake, the waters swirl, the flood-waters foam, the skies part asunder, fire from heaven comes down to punish iniquity. Hierarchies of angels come brandishing the sword. The wild forest boar, the beats of reeds and rushes, the buffalo, the fabled Hydra, the frightful Leviathan – all perish when God gives his verdict. Confronted by the real order of the world, the Reprobate is taken back to his pit for an eternity of turpitude.

Conclusion

The Psalms defines, describes, and dispenses with the persona of evil. Here is the evil rhetor who turns Yahweh’s wisdom upside down and who tries to draw others into his wrongheadedness and confusion by creating ethical chaos. He walks along the paths of darkness (v. 13b), himself devoid of all ethical illumination; he deserts straight roads in preference for those paths and tracks which twist and turn. This is a comparison between a man who is so devious and crafty that he loses himself and others in the maze of his cleverness, and the forthright, open man, who means what he says and whose actions are as unequivocal as his words. The good man needs righteousness if he is to match the opponent who regards the spreading of moral confusion and the engaging in sharp practices as a form of enjoyment – “Who take pleasure in evil-doing and delight in perversity” (v. 14). Jesus knows what we have yet to learn: God’s kingdom cannot be forced into existence using the means of the devil.

God never lies. God never changes. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Jeremiah Wright: “God was against slavery on yesterday, and God who does not change is still against slavery today. God was a God of love yesterday, and God who does not

change is still a God of love today. God was a God of justice on yesterday, and God who does not change is still a God of justice today. Turn to your neighbor and say, "God does not change."

God never fails. "You can't keep down what God wants up. God never fails. If God can get a three-day Jesus up out of a grave, what's going on in your life that in anyway can't match what God has already done? He'll abide with you, he'll reside in you, and he'll preside over your problems if you take them to Him and leave them with Him. God never fails. Turn and tell them "God never fails!" God never fails!"

If you are down, God wants you to be up! If you are listening to lies, God wants you to know the truth. If you are mad, God wants you to be glad! If you are feeling lonely and blue, God wants you to have fellowship with God's people. If you are bearing heavy burdens, God wants to help you carry the load.

A few general observations to start. The first Sunday in Lent recounts the temptation of Jesus every year with a reading from Luke one year, then Matthew the next year, and then Mark. Forty days is Bible lingo for a long time. I suspect Baptists and UCC not much for Lent because of that fasting business. We never took to anything like a Christian discipline getting in the way of dinner-on-the-ground. I once thought a church would run me off for announcing there would be no dessert at mid-week fellowship dinners during Lent. Yet Baptists mount the high horse to avoid the Sacrament of Holy Communion every Sunday. Lent is not much celebrated among many Baptists. I suspect this has to do with the garden variety resistance to all things considered "too" Catholic. And Baptists love to smugly quote those words from Jesus: "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are **fasting**. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

Baptist prejudices aside, as the ancient liturgy puts it:

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith. I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.

Here we are in the middle of March, a season already packed with secular liturgical events. Baseball has Spring Training; Basketball has "March Madness." Christians have Lent. Welcome to Lent!

Jesus takes on the devil in the wilderness. Think of Jesus taking on the devil on what he thinks is his home court. The devil probably had a pep rally and had all the little demons chanting, "Not in my house." Or maybe "Make hell great again." But it is not the devil's

house; this is our father's world. One of my favorite country songs is "The Devil Came Down to Georgia," and in this case I ignore the shoddy theology. The temptation of Jesus begins with one crucial statement: Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. Miss that and miss everything that happens. Miss that and the results would have been different.

Don't we want to be full of the Holy Spirit? Well, from creation to consummation of history, the Holy Spirit is present, active, powerful. Trust me, we want to be full of the Holy Spirit. This is one time you want your friends to say, "You are full of it."

Of all the unexpected moves, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. Some folks have tried to make us see the Holy Spirit as soft and sweet and emotional. We expect the Holy Spirit to lead Jesus to a prayer meeting or a church full of people or to an evangelistic conference. Instead he is led to the wilderness. Mark says the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness. Lent is wilderness time. We have a lot of experience with wandering in the wilderness. Survival is a reality television show that I have never watched because we are already involved in a more realistic effort to survive.

I have a poem that I use for Lent.

"What would the world be, once bereft
Of Wet and Wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet" (Gerhard Manley Hopkins)

There's a pious brand of Christianity that has no place for weeds and wilderness. The weeds are discarded; the wilderness is spiritualized as if it were a three-act fictional drama and there's no real sweat, blood, and tears, no actual agony in Jesus. For these Christians, he's just the bible's version of Superman and he easily dispatches the devil.

Don't fall for this generic brand of faith. This temptation is real. This is Jesus and the Devil one-on-one. Even more so this is the temptation story of humanity. Our temptation is what it is.

Picture the scene: Jesus in the wilderness with a fanatic, Bible-quoting devil. You can't always trust people who sling around Bible verses as if one verse contains all the revelation of God. Don't quote Leviticus to me and expect me to fold my tent and give up advocating for gays. Don't quote Romans 13 and expect me to start believing that the only function of government is to protect us from the wicked. Don't quote Paul telling women to be silent in church and expect me to pay any attention. I am not a believer in Bible-quoting devils.

Please tell me that you know the devil misuses and misinterprets Scripture. How interesting that the Bible can be used against us at times. I feel sorry for the Bible when I consider what horrific misuses it has been endured. After all, reading the Bible has produced more than 30,000 Christian denominations. All of us should feel the pain of the bitter division between Christian groups over the interpretation of the Bible. And in each of these groups there are outliers who don't agree with the doctrinal positions of their churches and then there's all those people who have left the church and figure that "private judgment" on the Bible is as good as it gets. That's a lot of biblical disagreement. Some folks love to quote Scriptures in a hot debate over issues. The anti-gay crowd has a template of six Scripture passages that are repeated endlessly. These quotes are more well-worn than an old poker chip at the local casino. But they seem to

provide consolation for those determined to use Scripture to harm people they swear they love with all their hearts.

Any Baptist worth her Sunday school education should beat the devil in a Bible Memory Drill. Yet we tend to treat the Bible with a lot of disrespect and forget that its purpose is lead us to repentance. The Bible gets a lot of mistreatment among American Christians. On one side there is a lot of misuse of the Bible as anyone can hold forth about what the Bible says. There's also a lot of ambivalence about the Bible, and then there are those preachers who no longer feel that grappling with a biblical text every week is important and they take their cues from the Atlantic Monthly or the New York Times. Armed with "common sense" and "personal religious experience" American Christians feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read the Bible.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote that a little knowledge of the Bible has done great harm: "where life is concerned its existence is a fortification of excuses and escapes" so that one never begins to live on the basis of the Bible's teaching. When it comes to the Bible a literary Jurassic Park has been developed and it filled with an array of weird, crazy, and often dangerous creatures each with different ways of reading the Bible.

Scripture can be used against others, to hurt them, to oppress them, to trick them. It was said of a Baptist deacon that "He could take that Bible and whip you to death with it." I remember being frightened as an eight-year-old when a visiting evangelist rolled up his big black Bible like a club and waved it around while growling, "God loves you." I couldn't feel the love for fear that he would smack me with the Bible. But please don't blame the Bible for the uses it is put to by its interpreters because it is the interpreters that are suspect. Like it or not, our certainties are shrouded in darkness. We see but, like the blind man not yet quite healed, we "see people, but they look like trees, walking."

Make no mistake. This is as old as the talking snake in the garden of Eden. Remember that the sneaky snake twisted and misinterpreted the Word of God for nefarious gain. Adam and Eve fell for it like an entire population swallowing the lies of a demagogue hook, line, and sinker. Jesus, the "new Adam and Eve" refused to accept the devil's offers

The temptation is always to rise not to fall. We often think of temptation as the silly little sins that dominated a previous era of Christian thought: drinking, smoking, gambling, cheating. But remember that in the garden, the devil didn't say, "Do you wish to live like and be the devil?" He said, "Do you wish to be as God?" Craddock says "The real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise." We are tempted to rise on our own power, show our own power, demonstrate our independence. From the garden to the tower of Babel, to the temptation in the wilderness it is always the temptation to live as if God doesn't matter.

No wonder some of the most chilling verses in the Bible are those that reveal the fate of those who reach for the heavens to be as God: How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit."

The temptation is to reach for the political power – to use the devil’s means to accomplish the purposes of God. The temptation is to take up the devil on his offer of wealth, fame, and sensationalism. Plenty of people make this deal with the devil.

When he was thirty-three, Andrew Carnegie wrote a “note to self” memo:

“Man must have an idol – The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. No idol more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately therefore should I be careful to choose the life which will be the most elevating in character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery. I will resign business at Thirty-five, but during the ensuing two years, I wish to spend the afternoons in securing instruction, and in reading systematically.”

Carnegie knew his own wilderness, his own temptation battle. He saw it with piercing insight and in spite of knowing, he still failed. He did not “resign business” at thirty-five and many of the very character-degrading effects he feared became a part of his own spirit.

The adversary of God interprets the word of God against the incarnate Word of God. But the devil with Scripture on his lips is rather clumsy and his inept interpretations are no match for the scriptural skill of Jesus. Like the devil down in Georgia facing the fiddle-playing magic of that good ole’ body Johnny, the end is a hung-head in the dust devil.

Now, look as Jesus “schools” the devil in the proper use of Scripture. What a contrast from the conniving devil when Jesus uses Scripture for guidance. Just because you have read the Bible doesn’t mean you have learned to interpret it. What does Jesus quote? “One does not live by bread alone.” “Worship the Lord, your God, and serve only him.” “do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Scripture is our resource not our ammunition to use against others.

We are to read the Bible and chew on it not spew and spit it at others. At Palmer Seminary our Thursday night chapel is called “Chapel and Chew.” As we chew on the bread of life, hopefully we will understand. For us, the Bible is the book that keeps saying, “Go and do likewise.”

This is also a story about power. What to do with power is one of our largest temptations. Do we want personal power to accomplish personal purposes? Do we want power for the common good, for a more just world, for the “least of these”? There’s some power that we should put down on the ground and walk away. There’s power that provides privilege and status and standing. There’s power that allows us to lord it over others. There’s power that gets us what we want and where we want to go. There’s power that abuses, oppresses, uses those who are weaker than us. This is the power of the devil. This is the power Jesus rejects.

Jesus looks weak as he rejects the power to control. Irony is that Jesus becomes the definition of God’s power. It’s a power that looks like weakness; but it is the power of God. Ralph Abernathy said that the first song at the first mass meeting of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 was “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”: “What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms. What have I to

fear, what have I to dread, leaning on the everlasting arms." What an appropriate choice.

When the devil offered Jesus power to turn stones into bread, he refused; when Jesus was offered authority over all the kingdoms of this world, he refused; when he was offered the possibility he would not die, he refused. He did so because Jesus knows that God's kingdom cannot be forced into existence using the means of the devil.

Jesus refuses to use the power of the world to achieve God's purposes. Cardinals and popes, and now Baptist preachers have lined up at the trough of political party, right there with all the hogs, wanting to be fed a bucket full of secular, political, devil power. Whatever criticism evangelicals have ever had of Roman Catholics is now muted by evangelicals falling in line to have the same kind of political power that Jesus rejected in the wilderness.

The church needs to be asking tough, critical questions? What does the majority culture have that we want? Are these wants legitimate and Christian? What does the majority culture have that we don't want? What do we have that we want to keep? If the church is going to be an alternative to the majority culture, we are going to have to actually be different.

If politicians offer us power, we need to walk away. We need to say "No." The church needs to walk away from the secular power. As God said to Moses back there in another wilderness, "Put it down, Moses. Put it down." There's a power that we don't need because it is of the devil. We need to put it down and let it lie there in the muck and grime. And we need to live without fear in the power of the Holy Spirit. With the Bible in hand, full of the Holy Spirit, let us walk even in wildernesses without fear. Do not be afraid.

With Cleve Jordan of Greenwood, Mississippi let us pray:

"Oh Father, Oh Lord,
Now, now, now Lordie, O Lord
When we get through drinking tears for water
When we get through eatin' at the unwelcome table
When we get through shakin' unwelcome hands
We've got to meet Death somewhere
Don't let us be afraid to die
Father, I stretch my hand to thee
No other help I know."