

Communion Meditation for the First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4: 1-13

Home Moravian Church, March 9, 2025

King Herod of Judea.

Emperor Augustus.

Quirinius, governor of Syria.

And Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate, and Philip, and Lysanias...

These are the names of the powerful that mark the time in the early chapters of Luke. Just as you and I might say something happened under Roosevelt or Reagan, the powers of Jesus' day define the spaces of Luke's stories.

But as soon as a space is defined, some aged priest or wild-haired prophet or very brave young woman steps into it and starts turning things upside down. The priest says a mighty savior will save his people from their enemies. The prophet cries that an axe is waiting to cut down trees that don't bear good fruit. The young woman sings that the powerful will be tossed off their thrones. Each time we think we know who's in charge, Luke suggests that we have more to learn about power. It's almost as if Luke is putting us in the same position as the devil—who, in today's story, has more to learn about power as well.

And yet the devil is adept in the ways of the powerful. He knows where they hang out, and where to listen for their news. His opening words to Jesus are, "If you are the Son of God...." Long before anyone else, the devil knows who Jesus is, because he keeps his ear to the ground.

And he knows what powerful people prefer. (Wouldn't that make a great advertising slogan? "What powerful people prefer!") For example: Powerful people prefer instant gratification. A powerful person need not walk around hungry, as Jesus is doing after fasting for forty days. Jesus can take care of that immediately. He's got the power to make bread out of stones. Why not use it?

When Jesus deflects, the devil probably shrugs. That test was kind of boring anyway; bread is so ordinary. The powerful people of the devil's acquaintance like things that sparkle. So the devil shows Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world," and offers a deal: He will give Jesus "all this authority and their glory"; all Jesus has to do is worship him. It's a win-win.

Like any accomplished con man, the devil assures his mark that the deal is on the up-and-up, declaring that the authority and the glory of all the kingdoms of the world *belong to him*. They have, as he says, "been given over to him"—presumably by others who fell for the deal that he is now offering Jesus. Maybe it's true—in which case it's quite the lesson about who holds the reins of power in this world. Or maybe the devil is offering property that he does not actually own. Who knows? Who cares? Not the great deceiver. If Jesus believes him, then Jesus is just another sucker, and the smart guy gets the win.

Is the devil discouraged when Jesus resists him again? Probably not. At the beginning of this story, we're told that Jesus was tested by the devil for *forty days*, so it seems the devil has abundant energy for his work.

The next temptation he offers sounds very *un*-tempting to me. "Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple"—Jerusalem's highest and most public place—"and let God's angels catch you." If I were standing with the devil on top of the temple, I might ask, "Um...what's my motivation?"

But the devil knows, and so does Jesus. The devil is inviting Jesus to display the scope of his power—to the world, and to himself. Hasn't that been the point all along? In every test—and the story does say that the devil was *testing* Jesus—the devil is urging Jesus to prove his own power *to himself*. Because the devil knows that with great power comes great insecurity. The powerful people the devil hangs out with need frequent reassurance that they are as important as they think they are.

Jesus again resists. It seems to be the final test, but we don't know. Remember: Forty days. But whenever it was that the devil “finished every test,” the devil didn't give up. Remember: Limitless energy. The text says the devil simply “departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time.”

We can learn much from Jesus by how he resists the devil in this story. I'm grateful for all the time the body of Christ spends studying and talking and learning about Jesus's power looks like. But as we head into Lent, thinking about repentance and what has pulled us from the paths to which God calls us, it seems like a good time to think about what evil might look like, and how evil understands and tries to use power.

Watching the devil busily waging the cosmic battle between good and evil, we can assume the techniques he's trying on Jesus have worked for him before. For example: *find a person's weakness, and drill into it*. Jesus is hungry, so the devil starts there. It didn't work with Jesus; I'm afraid that it might have worked with me. Hunger is just one of many very human weaknesses, and the devil knows them all. Remember: He keeps his ear to the ground.

When Jesus doesn't fold under that pressure, the devil moves on to something that has probably worked for him in dealing with, say, a king or two. For a quick education on kings, read First Samuel, chapter 8. Everything God says there about kings, the devil knows, too, and

uses to his benefit. The devil has probably found that a king is often looking for a deal—some unimportant concession he can make, something or someone worthless to him that he can discard, in order to increase his own power.

The devil assumes that he, and those kings, and Jesus are all alike. And that is where the devil is mistaken.

Those who think that power is the most important thing in this world will never understand those with no interest in this world's power. That's why the devil will never, ever understand Jesus; and that's what makes Jesus the most powerful of all.

So now let's look at real power, by looking at Jesus.

By declining the devil's invitation to turn stones into bread, Jesus demonstrates his commitment to spiritual discipline over immediate gratification; and he casts his lot with the hungry.

By committing himself to worship God alone, he demonstrates that he will not make a deal with evil in order to accrue worldly power; and he casts his lot with those who seek God.

By refusing to cast himself off the temple, he demonstrates his lack of interest in public displays of power; and he casts his lot with those who have no power to display.

The power of Jesus turns earthly powers upside down. It is the power that his mother, Mary, sings about, the power that lifts up the lowly while casting kings from their thrones. The one that Zechariah sings about as he looks forward to serving God without fear, in holiness and righteousness. The one that John prophesies when he urges his listeners to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." The one that Jesus himself will preach about later in Luke, with words like, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." It is the upside-down power that overcomes the power

of sin, and the devil, and death itself, when the one who dies a criminal's death is resurrected in glory. There are truths about power that the devil will never learn.

Meanwhile we, through the Holy Spirit, are blessed to know these truths: That Jesus came not to feed himself on the world's riches but to fill the hungry with good things. Not to ally himself with evil, but to tie our hearts more securely to the power of God. Not to show off but to identify with the unseen. Not to exploit our weaknesses but to connect with us through them. Not to make himself great, but to give himself away, feeding us his broken body in a holy meal.

May we be nourished today by this bread and cup; and may we spend all the days of Lent reflecting on true power, and turn our steps toward it, depending on Christ's grace.

Amen.