



The Tower

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Dear Friends,

Puzzling One of the most puzzling elements of the story of Holy Week is how, in a very few days, Jesus goes from being the focus of wild, exuberant joy and celebration—“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”—to being the object of universal scorn, vilification, and rejection, “Crucify him!” and “If you are the Son of God why don’t you come down from that cross?”

When I was growing up, Palm Sunday was only about the Triumphal Entry—the Passion Gospel was not read until Good Friday, a day when I was rarely in Church. Since 1979 our Prayer Book has suggested that Palm Sunday open with “Hosanna!” but, in the same liturgy, make its way to “Crucify him!” Including the dark conclusion of the story which begins with such festive elements is a great improvement over the earlier custom of the Passion never being read on a Sunday.

What’s missing? But if what we read aloud on Palm Sunday is all we have, we miss what caused the dramatic shift in Jesus’ popular standing. A lot happens between Jesus’ entry and his universal condemnation by the crowds. In the Temple, he casts out the money changers who served the useful function of keeping unclean pagan money from coming into contact with the holy precincts. And throughout Jerusalem that week he challenges the established and accepted customs, practices, and beliefs of religious leaders, secular power figures, and ordinary people. Rather than blaming all of their problems on the “other,” the occupying Roman authorities, Jesus challenges his fellow Jews to look to themselves for the sources of their own situation.

Offered the opportunity for popularity through denunciation and blame of “outsiders,” or those “not like us,” Jesus instead opts, because of what he sees of the people and what he knows of God, to challenge the core tenets of his audience, including their deep-seated belief in their own inherent goodness and special status as God’s elect. The result of his choosing to say what he believes to be God’s judgment instead of what people want to hear is that Jesus goes in a matter of days from being the front-runner to being the scorned outcast. The people, as it turns out, want affirmation; they do not want God.

Dwindling options, and an echo In some versions, especially in the Gospel of John, it looks like Jesus’ last ally—unlikely as it would seem—is Pilate, the Roman governor. “Don’t you realize I can

let you go?” an exasperated Pilate asks Jesus—“Just give me something to work with.” Pilate’s offer of release in return for token collaboration may not have been the last temptation of Christ, but it has—and this might have been even more pronounced for first century Christians living under Roman rule—a bit of an echo of one of Satan’s temptations in the Wilderness at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry: “Make a deal with me,” Satan offers in that conversation, “and I will be your ally and put my considerable influence behind you to assist you in all your plans.”

A deal with the devil is tempting because it offers a short-cut, but Jesus, at the beginning and at the end, knows that such deals never produce the desired result, and so he turns away from Satan at the outset, and away from Pilate at the end.

As it was in the beginning Temptation and Wilderness bracket the story of Jesus’ adult ministry. At the outset, just after his baptism, Jesus goes out to the Wilderness where he considers his identity and mission. Matthew and Luke distill his reflections into three ways of going forward—we traditionally call them “temptations”—which Jesus finally rejects. What makes the three options both interesting and genuinely tempting is that, shorn of the first-century narrative rhetoric, they sound neither evil nor obviously bad.

Initial strategy planning “Why not focus on providing immediate material relief for those in greatest need?” is one way to think of the temptation of turning stone into bread. “Make your ministry all about literal feeding” is by no means something obviously evil. It’s tangible, makes sense to anyone, doesn’t require much of the beneficiaries, and addresses what seems to be a real and universal evil, hunger. But Jesus says “No.”

Luke [4:1-13] continues to imagine Jesus considering whether he might be more effective if he made reasonable compromises with the powers of the world. One can imagine the inner conversation: “Do you want to be pure, or do you want to make a difference? Isn’t it actually self-indulgent to put your so-called integrity before getting your hands a little dirty to do genuinely good work? Growing up means accepting the necessity of compromise, and if you don’t like it, you can always go back.” It was tempting then; it is tempting now. But again, Jesus says “No.”

And then comes the third option—“If you do something spectacular to attract everyone’s attention to yourself, to show that what afflicts ordinary people does not touch you, think of how you could use your celebrity status to influence the whole world. If you present yourself as above what afflicts everyone else, you will be praised and with that power no one can stand in your way.” And again, Jesus says, “No.”

The reasonable temptations Especially in an election year (and sometimes it seems like every year is an election year) these temptations sound as familiar in our setting as they were in the time of Jesus. Jesus is tempted not by the promise of alluring sexual partners, not by opulent luxury, nor by any other sensual pleasure—the sorts of images that “temptation” tends first to arouse when used in our culture. Jesus is tempted by materialism, by pragmatism, and by an egocentric narcissistic vision of public ministry. Jesus is tempted by courses for which a reasonable argument could be made.

Do you come here often? Perhaps one lesson from this account of Jesus considering his options is that Evil is more likely to come to us in the guise of reasonable discourse offering us what we want to hear than as a figure with horns and pitchfork or an obviously sleazy affect.¹ Even in his first scene, with Eve in Genesis 3, Satan is urbane, sophisticated, and charming. One can imagine him coming up to Eve (you will recall at this point he seems to move upright and is not a slithering

¹ For the record, the horns, pitchfork, and sleaze inevitably manifest themselves later.

serpent) standing a few feet away and looking out over the landscape, sighing slightly, and opening the conversation by saying something like, “Stunning, isn’t it. Just look at all this beauty...” Eve might make some neutral response and Satan, smiling warmly, might take a step closer and say the Genesis equivalent of “Hello, I’m Satan—this is one of my favorite places—do you come here often?”

It would be a while later, and not in their first conversation, that Satan might ask, “Do you think the God who made all this would actually want to set the fruit of any tree as off-limits? Wouldn’t it be more reasonable to think that God created all of this—all of it—for our delight and enjoyment? All this talk about what is permitted and what is forbidden, that doesn’t sound much like a loving God to me. Come to think of it, I doubt if God ever actually said that himself, or, even if he said it, if he meant it to be understood so literally. I suspect that what God really wants is for us fully to enjoy all the fruits of his creation—wouldn’t that be the more holy, indeed even the more obedient, way to honor God?”

For a temptation to be genuine, it, like a really good heresy, ought to be plausible, seem reasonable, enhance a sense of our own importance and independence, and give us permission to do what we really want to in the first place.

Not just Adam and Eve Much of the drama of the early books of the Bible comes from temptations and choices—to the Patriarchs and their families, to Moses, to the people in the Wilderness after the Exodus, and to Israel after their entrance into the Promised Land. The story of Satan and humanity does not stay behind in early Genesis, but crops up over and over again throughout the Bible. And perhaps beyond.

Indeed, some other time it might be interesting to go through the story of Jesus’ ministry and identify all of the temptations—not just to him, but to those whom he encounters—and see what resonance they might have with questions and challenges which we face now, looking especially at the temptations which are more subtle in their nature. Jesus’ sharpest rebuke to any of his disciples is to Peter, one of his inner circle, whom he actually addressed as “Satan” when Peter suggested that Jesus might accomplish all his mission without any actual suffering. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus says to Peter, “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things (Mark 8:33).”

The Garden, the Wilderness, and a prayer Near the end of the Gospel story, after the Last Supper, Jesus makes his way to a space which has elements of both Eden and the Wilderness—he goes off to the Garden of Gethsemane. And there he faces another temptation. At the end of the temptations early in Luke, the author concludes by saying that Satan “departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time (4:13).” I wonder if the scene in the Garden, immediately before Jesus’ arrest, is that “opportune time.” This is the last moment when it would have been fairly easy for Jesus to slip away to safety, to retreat north to Nazareth, regroup, and strategize about the next phase of his ministry.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of how Jesus struggled with the decision. Mark’s account may be the most stark: Leaving most of the disciples at a distance, Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John, “and he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want (Mark 14:34-36).’”

I find this a powerful prayer. Jesus is clear about what he wants—that he might avoid the time of trial and the ensuing suffering, public humiliation, and even testing of his spirit. After the manner of many of the psalms, Jesus includes in his prayer a reminder to God that God is, after all, all powerful, so that what Jesus asks is well within God's ability to grant. But then Jesus invokes his own faith, “yet, not what I want, but what you want.” For me, it is that declaration of submission and obedience which defines the power of both the prayer and of Jesus' character.

Teach us to pray The Lord's Prayer is famous as Jesus' response to the disciples' request that he teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). But this Gethsemane prayer might make a good model for us as well. Preceded by honesty with his friends about his state of mind and spirit [“I am deeply grieved, even to death”], Jesus begins by recognizing God's loving, personal, individual relationship [“Abba, Father”]. He acknowledges God's power [“for you all things are possible”], he is clear about what he desires [“remove this cup from me”], and he concludes with the recognition that as much as he might want that for which he prays, it may not be, for reasons he—or we—cannot understand, the will of the loving and powerful God to grant the request [“yet not what I want, but what you want”].

Jesus offers a prayer, not a dare—Jesus does not say that if he does not get what he wants, he will turn his back on God. God is his Father, not a business partner to whom he might make a commitment or a payment and, in return, expect to receive appropriate goods and services. This is not a negotiation, nor does it include a penalty clause [“If you do not give me what I know to be right, we are finished.”].

“I did it my way” St. Paul is clear that Jesus could have insisted on his own way: Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).” The paradox may be that he did, indeed, do it his way, but his way was to be obedient to his Father, not to do what he may have desired himself. Obedience is not imposed on Jesus, rather, he chooses it. Paul goes on to say, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...(Philippians 2:9).”

Paul's image is that just as humanity's propensity for choosing independence over obedience (summarized in the story of Adam and Eve) leads to disorder and death by virtue of being out of harmony with the basic trajectory of the Creator's creation, so Jesus' choosing obedience over independence produces the opposite, life and exultation (1 Corinthians 15:42-49). By extension, therefore, if we would choose life, we would prioritize obedience over going our own way. We still have the ability to choose—it is not a case of slavery versus freedom. The question is when choosing a course, would we choose one which leads eventually to life, though it might not make as much sense in the short term, or do we choose what makes sense to us now and hope that it will take us to the life we desire.

Jesus, at the beginning of his earthly ministry and at the end, faces just this kind of choice. With Satan in the Wilderness at the outset, and with his own doubts and fears in Gethsemane, Jesus chooses obedience. In the first instance, the result was a ministry which far exceeded anything which a materialistic, pragmatic, and ego-centric approach might have accomplished. And perhaps seeing how that initial faithfulness had played out helped Jesus to take that final commitment of faithfulness so that, with the cross before him, he could say, “yet not what I want, but what you want.”

Learn by example The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews takes the example of Jesus and offers it as a resource to each of us. “Let us,” he [or she?] writes, “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).”

Maybe “the joy” was some image of heaven, but I wonder if the joy was more about trusting, being faithful, and not turning aside as things began to become truly challenging. I wonder if that last temptation was whether Jesus would have the courage to ground his entire being and identity in his trust of God rather than in what seemed reasonable or made sense.

We know what he chose, we know how it turned out—initially it looked bad, but finally it was the most opposite of bad that anything could be. Perhaps as we move through, or look back on, Holy Week and Easter, we might, as Paul suggests, have this mind in ourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, trusted in God more than he trusted in himself, even to the point of death. And, having given himself over to God, found himself raised up by God into a life and realm beyond all reasonable experience and understanding.

What if the issue is not whether God will give or withhold eternal life, based on what we have done or what Jesus did, but whether we will simply turn away from ourselves and turn to God who invites us to trust and awaits our choice. And, once we enter into that trust, even here and now, welcomes us and lifts us up to himself in one way now, and in another way hereafter.

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