

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

March 6, 2022

*I Lent & Peace March for Ukraine, Luke 4:1-13*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

“Full of the Holy Spirit” following his baptism, Jesus enters the wilderness as this morning’s Gospel reading begins.<sup>i</sup> In the Gospel of Mark (the basis of our Lenten series now set to begin next Sunday) the Holy Spirit “*immediately drives*” Jesus into the wild – “*drives*,” the same Greek verb Mark uses to describe Jesus’ casting out demons.<sup>ii</sup> Mark characterizes the Spirit’s power over Jesus as a form of possession, a force from another dimension hurling him from the river.

Here in Luke’s Gospel, however, a gentler Spirit “*leads*” Jesus.<sup>iii</sup> See, in Luke, Jesus can *choose* whether to follow. At some elemental level, he recognizes his baptism’s consequence, and, conceding the easier futures that might still lie before him, Jesus *chooses the wilderness* – elects for the righteous path, no matter its foreboding.

For forty days in the wild, the devil torments him,<sup>iv</sup> yet Jesus will not break his fast. As the ordeal nears its end and a “famished”<sup>v</sup> Christ reaches his point of greatest vulnerability, the devil tempts him three times:

- . tempts him to turn stones into bread;<sup>vi</sup>
- . tempts him to assume dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth;<sup>vii</sup>
- . and tempts him to test God in the sight of the people.<sup>viii</sup>

As a collective, the three challenges present a powerful continuum of seduction, not only for Jesus, but for all of us.

To begin where the devil ends, at one end of the proving ground the devil *tempts us to despair*. Having decided for himself that healing the world of its violence and greed is impossible, the devil dangles Jesus from the temple’s pinnacle:

*... Nazarene, all your people you can see from this great height –  
has your Father’s Kingdom come any closer? Of course not.  
This world is past the point of being well.  
Save yourself the broken heart!  
And listen: if your Father has truly entrusted you as Savior,  
then let him save you in the sight of the people – then they will believe!  
Only such a dramatic act could motivate their weak spirits.  
Come now: let’s see if you can fly from this high perch ...*

So, too, the devil drips despair into *our* ears:

*... Why even go to church?  
Jesus didn't save your father from cancer,  
didn't protect your marriage from conflict,  
didn't shield your children from pain!  
Look around the globe: has your Jesus stopped even a single bullet, or  
dissuaded tyrants from their violent whims?  
If God wanted you in church – to pay that pledge on schedule –  
wouldn't you have received a sign by now?  
Leave this place to the fools,  
the suckers who believe this world can end in anything other than its own destruction ...*

Jesus answers the devil, “It is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test.”<sup>xix</sup>

At the other end of this continuum, the devil *tempts us to fix in our own image* [Do we have any “fixers” out there this morning?]:

*... Nazarene, they can't do it themselves!  
Look how the struggle:  
the pathetic fights they choose and all their petty infidelities.  
They need you!  
Of course, you won't be an evil despot like the rulers they have known;  
you will be a loving king!  
Come, take your throne! ...*

Closer to our kitchen tables, we undermine our interdependence with one another and conjure tales of our essentialness:

*... What time is it? Is it really 7:15 already?  
Man, I'd love to go downstairs for supper with the family,  
but I just can't leave my Zoom station.  
I mean, I would go, but no one else in this office of incompetents can do what I can do.  
We just have to finish this project by weekend –  
it ought to have been finished tonight – and could have been, if I had any help.  
I'll try and sign off earlier tomorrow ...*

Jesus answers the devil, “It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”<sup>xx</sup>

And at the heart of these seductions – at the intersection of despair and savior complexes – the deceiver *tempts us to legitimize selfishness*. The devil proposes Jesus feed himself:

*... Nazarene, why do you think God gave you these miraculous gifts?  
So you could starve yourself out here in the wilderness?  
That's ridiculous!*

*Take these stones and turn them to bread,  
so that you can be strong for the work before you.  
No one is here to see, no one is watching, and  
you likely need the practice of wiggling your nose,  
or waving your wand,  
however it is you call upon these strange powers ...*

And indulging our blessings, we grant ourselves permission to ignore the sufferings of others:

*God did not bless me this way so that I could struggle;  
God blessed me this way so that I could succeed!  
God wants me to taste the fruit of my labors,  
to enjoy the riches of the world God has made.  
No one else is looking out for me, so why should I look out for anyone else?  
I deserve these good things,  
why else would God set them before me?  
Let God care for others' ills – according to the Divine plan ...*

Jesus answers the devil, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”<sup>xi</sup>

People of God, as Jesus chose, so, too, must *we* choose. And our choosing demands we resist that first temptation: to indulge distraction from the suffering in Ukraine and in *every* war-ravaged nation. As we heard Paul commend the Corinthians on Ash Wednesday: “Now is the acceptable time[! N]ow is the day of salvation!”<sup>xii</sup> *This* is the moment of consequence, the time for us to *choose* whether we will align ourselves with the forces of Light and Life or those powers of despair and death.

Therefore, this morning Trinity Church steps toward *Love*.

Joining with our Ukrainian neighbors – indeed, joining with all people of goodwill “at all times and in all places”<sup>xiii</sup> – we pray for an *end* to violence, and we rally against this godless war, opposing every aggression against even one whom the Lord of Love has made.

Recall: the devil claims world domination on the world’s terms, and he declares he may give that power “to anyone [he pleases],” with a singularly disqualifying catch: “If [only] we will worship him” – if only we will bow down to power, to the ease that comes only at the expense of others.<sup>xiv</sup> No matter the intentions of a person or community, as it is among us that interpersonal cruelties, beget cruelties, beget cruelties, so it is among nations: wars, beget wars, beget wars, one season’s superficial peace nothing more than a temporary ceasefire, as long as we legitimize violence against one another. We Christians worship the One who gave himself to death on a cross *rather than take up arms against his enemies*. Therefore, while others march to battle, we march for Peace – Peace! – shoulder to shoulder and not for a season only, but for evermore.

While others tear down, we build up, increasing compassion in ourselves and encouraging greater Grace in one another. While others trust in the weapons of war, we bow before the God “in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, [and] no strength known but the strength of Love.”<sup>xv</sup> For we recognize that all we do – not only here as a congregation, but at home, at work, and in the community – as individuals and as families, we recognize that our daily lives either make a difference in this movement for mercy or enriches those evil forces in league with the devil of Jesus’ wilderness temptations. Friends, what we do this day *matters*; the quality and character of our love for one another declares God’s hope for the whole world.

Therefore, people of God, I urge you to lace up your shoes and trust in the Spirit of your baptism which fills you even now. And taking heart in the company of all the Body of Christ inside this house, on our steps, and in the Square, let us dare the wilderness road together and march its righteous path for Peace.

For the life of the world to come,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 4:1a.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 1:12,

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 4:1b.

<sup>iv</sup> Growing up in the Deep South, the devil lived in whiskey bottles, heavy-metal LPs, and the backseats of four-door sedans. I heard this as an externalizing of responsibility, a friend or neighbor suggesting that a force outside of them (personified as a red-complexioned fellow with horns and a red tail) directed their bad behavior. I honor the Gospel’s language of “devil” here, though do not intend what my classmates’ pastors intended. The wilderness scene more resembles what Luke Skywalker faced in the Dagobah cave; Jesus confronts the temptations lurking inside his own heart.

<sup>v</sup> Luke 4:2.

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 4:3.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 4:6-7.

<sup>viii</sup> Luke 4:9-11.

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 4:12.

<sup>x</sup> Luke 4:8.

<sup>xi</sup> Luke 4:4.

<sup>xii</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2.

<sup>xiii</sup> “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.” From “Holy Eucharist, Rite I,” *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 333,341.

<sup>xiv</sup> Luke 4:6-7.

<sup>xv</sup> From the prayer “For Peace,” *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 815. “Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread

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abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*”