

Psalm 25: 1-10  
Luke 4:1-13

“Renunciation”

R.P.C.  
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At the beginning of his ministry, as Jesus was starting his life work, Satan encountered him in the wilderness. We note that our Scripture begins today by saying, *“Jesus, filled with the Spirit, was led into the wilderness.”* We should also note that this episode with Satan in the wilderness occurs immediately after Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove upon him and there is a voice from heaven saying, *“This is my beloved Son.”*

Don’t you find it interesting then, that after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, Jesus is led into the wilderness? Perhaps you, like me, always thought that the gift of God’s Spirit led someone toward peace, satisfaction, joy and good feelings. But no, for Jesus at least, the gift of the Spirit led him into the wilderness.

There, in the wilderness, far from the city – alone and far from the support of others – far from the comforts of civilization – Jesus is encountered by Satan. This might just suggest, in my thinking at least, that people who receive the Spirit ought to expect that they STILL might be encountered by Satan. But that is material for another sermon.

In the wilderness, Satan makes Jesus a number of tempting offers. Satan doesn’t attack Jesus, assault him or abuse him. Rather he offers him gifts. And they are good gifts – gifts Jesus needs, and could use. Satan offers Jesus bread. Of course Jesus was likely famished, having been in the wilderness for forty days – a long time. And what gift is more basic, or necessary for life than bread? Most of us spend most of our day working for ‘our daily bread.’ Most of human creativity is tied to economic production. Most of us North Americans have lived through an incredibly affluent time, so there has been lots of bread. And Jesus’ response to Satan’s offer of the gift of bread? ... He refuses.

Satan then offers Jesus power. If Jesus would just pay Satan appropriate homage, he would be given power over all the kingdoms of this world. Satan seems to assume that he is in charge of all such power. Though that observation is a bit discomfoting, because that seems to put Satan in charge of politics! Of course, we know that power, in its purest, intended form is a good thing.

Notice that Satan is not offering Jesus lust, or greed, or any inherently bad thing. Satan is offering Jesus another good thing – power. Of course power in Jesus’ hands would surely be power to do good. . . . Come to think of it, have you ever known anybody who said he or she wanted power to do bad things – except

in comic books or movies? Power is always given for noble things like “economic development” or “national self-determination.” It is given for the “liberation of women and minority groups” or for the “reform of the church” or other such noble objectives.

We certainly live in a culture that values power. That is because, for most of us, we have bread enough and to spare, so we spend most of our time trying to acquire more power. We want power to live our lives as we please, to make the choices we want to make. We admire people who have power and know how to use it. Conversely, we have contempt for leaders who seem powerless - Satan offers Jesus all the power anyone could want – power over every kingdom of the world. And Jesus refuses. Jesus says, “No!”

Finally, perhaps sensing now the sort of person Jesus is, Satan offers Jesus religion. Having failed at tempting him with bread and power, two commodities which are so self-evidently ambitious and prone to abuse, Satan offers him religion. He offers him a chance at spiritual showbiz: ‘Throw yourself down from the tower and there will be spectacular religious results – angels will catch you.... Can you imagine the press and TV coverage you could get with that, Jesus?’

There is a great deal of interest in our day in such spectacular religion – religion that works. We spend so much time trying to secure health and happiness through bread or through political power, why not use religion in the same way? We have so many different paths to get what we want – hard work, therapy, the acquisition of stocks and bonds, why not religion too? Isn’t religion a good thing? Would it not be a good thing to have so much faith that one could jump off a cliff, confident of divine protection? And yet, even when faced with Satan’s offer for spiritual heroics, Jesus says, “No!”

Maybe you too find it interesting that Jesus is first known to us not by the things that he affirms, or the actions he accomplishes, but rather by what he refuses. I’m reminded that this is the first time we have seen Jesus in action up to this point in Luke’s Gospel. This is the very beginning of his ministry. These are the first words we hear from Jesus as an adult. And his very first word is “No!”

‘No’ is a very small word with only two letters, but it is very revealing. We usually would rather know what a person believes, rather than what they don’t believe. We are primarily interested in what a person will do, rather than what they refuse to do. And yet, at the beginning Jesus is known by what he rejects rather than what he affirms. Even before Jesus preaches or teaches or heals, he utters the little word, “No!”

Luke says then that after these three renunciations of Jesus, Satan “slinks away and waits for a more opportune time.” That sounds rather foreboding. When will that time be? When will Jesus again be in the wilderness, hungry, alone and vulnerable?

For now however, here is an occasion for us to consider all that we know about Jesus on the basis of what he renounces. In his three renunciations, Jesus is at odds with three of the most cherished possessions of this, our culture: consumer goods, power and religion. More than that, Jesus is at odds with the entire disposition and attitude of our culture. Our favorite slogan is not “No!” Our favorite slogans are things like, “Go for it!”, “Go ahead, indulge – you deserve it.” or just plain “Yes!”

We believe in affirmation rather than renunciation. We think of ourselves not primarily as citizens, or sisters and brothers, but as consumers. If we want it we have a sworn duty to do everything in our power to get it. And if we can have it, we have a responsibility to take it. “Don’t deny thyself” is the contemporary 11<sup>th</sup> commandment – In other words, learn to say “Yes!”

There was a young woman who made excellent grades in college. Her professors encouraged her to go on to graduate school, and prepare for a bright and lucrative career in the academic field in which she excelled. But she declined. She chose instead a career in community service, working for a meager salary in a community agency that assists poor women and their children. One of the professors told her, “I think you are wasting your God-given talents in turning your back on a great career.” “God has given you these talents; you ought to use them,” he continued. “I AM using them,” she replied. Our culture thinks more of people who say “yes” to self, than those who choose to say no.

When Jesus was confronted by Satan, he resisted Satan, not with Satan’s weapons of power, violence, coercion or force. All he did was speak to Satan. He resisted only with words – well ... THE WORD. Jesus quoted scripture. And Luke tells us which scripture Jesus quotes – all of which are pertinent to the temptation and quite interesting. But mainly all of this Scripture can be summed up in the little word, “No!” Jesus dared to say “no” to Satan. And all Satan could do was slink away....

Do you know of anyone who has turned his or her back on the disposition and attitude of this, our culture and all it has to offer? Such people can be a real threat to this world and those of us who may have too easily surrendered to the temptations of this world. And yet ... sometimes we marvel and are attracted to those who have renounced the usual disposition and attitude.

“What can we do to get Mark into our fraternity?” a fraternity brother asked at their recruitment meeting. Mark was a freshman who was bright and promising, and whose GPA would increase the combined average of the fraternity. He was also from a small town in Maryland, and to the other brothers did not really seem to be “fraternity material.”

“Why would you think Mark would want to join a fraternity,” asked one brother. “Well when you talk to him, he is one of the coolest people in the freshmen class.” “Cool? “Yea, cool. How many people you know at this university who will tell you that they are here to pursue their lifelong ambition to become a pastor of a small rural church in Maryland? That’s SO radical!”

Sometimes folks like Mark become a kind of “monkey wrench” thrown into the clanking machinery of our present order, so they get noticed. In a world where most of us “go along to get along”, just one person with the strength to say “no” to the usual order becomes attractive and incredibly interesting.

On this Sunday we begin our walk with Jesus toward the cross. Satan is still waiting for a more opportune time. The battle is not over; in fact, with Jesus’ renunciation, the battle is just beginning. The account reminds us that Jesus was sent to the cross, not simply because he was the Son of God and people were threatened by that. He was not some robot who was born only to walk toward the cross and die for our sins. Rather, Jesus was sent to the cross because of what he said and did. Or more to the point of Luke’s account, he was put on that cross for what he refused to say and do. He was put on the cross for saying “no” to all the temptations.

Something in Jesus (let us be honest here) both repels and attracts us. We are frightened by one who is offered everything in love, all that we worship and giving our lives for – and yet he renounces and refuses all of that. Still, there is that something about him which still attracts us, even in his ability to renounce. And we who are urged to follow Jesus by taking up his cross daily and following him wonder what this means for us. It is surprising that the temptations which beset Jesus are the same ones that beset us every day of our lives.

Satan offered the same commodities that we are offered, and yet Jesus was able to stand to his full moral height and say “No!” Satan slinked away, waiting a more opportune time.... I wonder if one of those times came again when Jesus was in the garden all alone and he prayed, “Take this cup from my lips.”? But then he quickly righted himself, with “Not my will, but yours be done.” By renouncing the temptation to quit before giving himself in death, he usurped all of Satan’s “supposed power” – even the power of death – Thus he became the

'Bread" of heaven, and established the power of the kingdom of all kingdoms - the Kingdom of God.

Have you wondered when that "more opportune time" will come to us? I expect it will be all those times when we are offered something that seems so good – that will make us feel so good that we will not even bother to question its value. It will be something that nine out of ten Americans will want and will rationalize as being acceptable – OK. Then later, when we realize how much this choice has cost us, we will realize that this again has been one of Satan's "opportune times."

While we may not be able to, like Jesus, have just the right verse of scripture on the tip of our tongue; while we may not be able to fully articulate the theological rationale for our decision, we are all still capable of renouncing. We can all still offer that one little word "No" – which surprisingly is always enough to cause Satan to stop.

In Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" you might remember that line that says, "The Prince of Darkness Grim, we tremble not for him, one little word shall fell him." Based on today's passage, it sure seems like that one word is simply "No!" So when tempted, we can always choose to renounce, and then watch Satan slink slowly away.... Amen.