

The Lutheran priest, author and speaker, Nadia Boltz-Weber wrote an article last week entitled “Freaking the Hell Out: An Essay on Fear and Faith”. In it, she states:

“I want some day to get the point where I can trust God in the moment and not just in retrospect. Maybe things will work out, maybe they won’t - but I can either have a sense of God’s love during the whole thing, or I can be so freaked out I forget it’s there.

Because here’s what I believe: the Triune God, whose love is powerful enough to raise Christ from the dead, simply will not be separated from me or from you. Not by a storm, not by a crisis, not by a pandemic, not by a war and not even by death... [these] cannot, shall not, will not separate us from God’s love.”<sup>1</sup>

I hear her, as I am sure we all do. We’ve been bombarded over the past two years with tragedy; the pandemic, the convoy, and humanitarian crises around the globe, in Syria, Yemen, Burundi, and others, and now Haiti. Our fears and anxieties are peaked, and now the horrors of the war in Ukraine, that has already killed countless innocents and seen over a million people become refugees, has been piled onto our already fragile consciences.

The mystery of Scripture, is that it never fails us as the living, breathing word of God. It feeds and invites us to put our trust in God. The readings for this

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/freaking-the-hell-out?s=r>, February 25, 2022.

first Sunday of Lent, give us firm grounding for our present times and our Lenten journeys. The Book of Common prayer provides us with practices for Lent: self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word. Lent is a time of trial and of transformation. This morning's Gospel is such a time for Jesus; one that is played out on the cosmic stage. The devil, *diabolos*, is the tester, and Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit is the tested. It's important to remember that the devil is not parallel to God in power but simply a member of the heavenly court, who tries and test us along our journeys.

This is a transition time between Jesus' baptism, where he passively submits to the will of God – recall, Luke tells us, “Jesus **was** baptised”, and “the Spirit **descended upon** him...., **and his active** ministry. By entering the wilderness, Jesus, filled with the Spirit, removes himself from community, away from material desires, to introspect – through self-examination, prayer and fasting, Jesus is working through what it means to be the Son of God; and how he intends to carry out his ministry. Jesus stays in the desert for 40 days; a direct reference to the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert; a transitional time from enslavement to the Promised Land. During this time, the Israelites experienced the same tests that Jesus will experience. The Israelites, apart from Moses, will not pass the

tests, as so often, we ourselves do not... But **Jesus will succeed**. In doing so, he will restore Israel and all humanity – and break the chains sin and death.

The first test.... Jesus has fasted for 40 days and he's famished. The devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread"... and Jesus responds quoting Deut 8:3, "One does not live on bread alone". The devil is tempting Jesus to stray from God, and to follow his own way, his own design, for personal gain. Unlike the Israelites in the desert who rebelled against God because they were hungry, and were humbled when God provided dew, manna and quail, Jesus stays true to God's plan, knowing that, once we lift our eyes beyond the desert stones, and raise them to God, God will provide. And God's gift is bountiful and for all. Like the manna, all should be fed, no one should go without and it is not to be hoarded. Consider world hunger, consider those in Ukraine, for whom supplies are running out, and consider what God's bounty means... There is enough. There is more than enough.... God's bounty is freely given for all. But we prevent this from happening with policies and power that hoard, agricultural practices that limit reproduction and kill the land, greed, and violence that stops goods from reaching destinations... Our Lenten self-reflection, calls us to consider what this means in terms of our ministry. How do we strive to

share in our bounty? How do we contribute and give alms to those who go without?

The second test gets at the heart of how Jesus will use his power and authority. The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and tells him he can have it all! This hints at a theme within Luke's Gospel, that humanity is subjected to the darkness and rule of the devil. It speaks to the corruption of powers and principalities; the systems that oppose God's plan and strive for expansionism, rule by fear, self-interest and cruelty; racist, xenophobic systems that make the rich richer and the poor poorer, and the rise in fascist and populists' ideologies around the world, that we have recently been subjected to in our own city.

In this test, the devil, seeing how Jesus relied on Scripture, tries to use Scripture against God's design. God has already granted Jesus the eternal kingdom in the first chapter of Luke, where he is promised the throne of David... and yet, the devil tries to divert Jesus from this promise by offering him the same promise, but for his own personal power. Only the devil's promise is not freely given but would come at a great price; the price of loyalty to evil. Just as when we follow false gods, it comes with a great price. Consider when we seek the love of power over the power of love, what that does to our souls. Consider what

happens when governments enact laws that oppress and subsume, like the *Indian Act*, or criminalize journalism, to hide truth. As the great civil rights leader Fanny Lou Hamer said “nobody’s free until everybody is free”. Jesus, as God’s agent in the world, filled with the Spirit, quotes Deuteronomy again (6:14-15), to remind us of how Israel strayed in the desert, and sought out the Canaanite cults... a consequence of which resulted in them being bitten by snakes... While Moses had to direct his people back to God, Jesus firmly places his loyalty to the kingdom of God for all.

The third test... here the devil once again attempts to take Scripture out of context. This time, it’s with a vision of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies; a place of refuge and strength in God. The devil using the words of today’s psalm, that Jesus “lives in the shelter of the most High”, tries to get Jesus to test this divine promise. But he warps the context of the psalm. The psalm is addressed to all believers... that God will be there with them as they endure through terrible circumstances. Jesus, not duped, again quotes Deuteronomy (6:16), “you shall not put the Lord your God to the test”. He is referring to when the Israelites, thirsty in Massah and Meribah demanded water. Moses calls upon God, strikes the stone and water comes forth... but reprimands them for testing God.

That Jesus turns to Scripture to withstand his tests, is a comfort to us, as Paul says to the Ephesians, during our times of trial, the Word of God is the “sword of the Spirit”. But take heed, that Scripture out of context is often misused to evil gains. Jesus’ responds to the tests through the lens of Deuteronomy, and the Shema (Deut 6:4-7) “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength”. His trials recall our trials and frailties, by taking us to the exodus, and showing us how easy it is for us in our personal and worldly hells, to lose faith in God, and to pursue personal gain. **Jesus does not!** Let this be a comfort to us as we pray that by observing a holy Lent, we can redirect our exhausted hearts that have endured and are enduring so much pain and suffering, to God, so we can learn to “trust God in the moment and not in retrospect” ..., knowing that God’s love and mercy endure forever and nothing can separate us from the love of God.

### **Resources:**

Pulpit Fiction: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent1c>

Green, J.B., 1997. The Gospel of Luke. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids: Michigan.

Fitzmyer, J.A., 1981. The Gospel According to Luke I-IX. The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York: New York.