

The Word: It is Written

(A Message in Four Parts, with a Nod to Colbert Nation)

Luke 4:1-13

CWZepp, BWCOB, April 18, 2010

Scripture Reading

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)

(From Lectern)

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ ”

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ” ¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

(Close Bible and sit down at a desk situated where the pulpit would usually be. Power on projector with opening title page)

Church, we live in a perilous time. You may not know it, but we are on the threshold of disaster. Everywhere we turn, doomsday prophets are heralding the demise of our glorious enterprise and trumpeting the death of Christendom. The ranks of our membership are being thinned by the day, as our old ones move on to meet their maker, and our young ones are admitted into colleges and universities. In such a time, we might be tempted to cave in to the pressures around us and make a deal with the devil just to get us through another few hundred years. But Church, as we just read, even Jesus Christ faced temptation. And if we want to make it through unscathed like our Lord and Savior, we need to be ready for whatever the devil may throw our way. We need some insight into his game plan. So it's a good thing you have me this morning because it's all right there in the story. Open up your Bibles and take another look at Luke's temptation narrative with me. Its time for the:

The Threat Down!

Threat #5 – Wilderness Areas. (*Graphic: wilderness scene*) Now I mean no disrespect to my tree-hugging, Earth-Day celebrating friends. But all these wilderness areas need to go! Everyone knows that's where the devil hangs out. Even Jesus had all he could do to hold his own when the devil had home field advantage. Church, if we have any hope of resisting the temptations facing us, it can only be by flushing the devil out of his lair and luring him onto *our* home-court: a well-built edifice with artificial lighting, a well-manicured lawn, and a convenient place to pick up a name tag on the way in. (*Graphic: BWCOB building*) Try as he might, I don't think he could hide in here. (*Graphic: Hello my name is "Lucy Fur" Name Tag*)

Threat #4 – Vegetarianism. (*Graphic: Vegetarian Food Pyramid*) Don't believe me? Just listen to Jesus – human beings are not meant to live on bread alone. Yes, Jesus obviously knew what the good Dr. Atkins has taught us – that we can resist the temptations of various baked goods – if we are still working off the effects of a 64 oz. porterhouse. (*Graphic: Steak*)

Threat #3 – Global Perspective. (*Graphic: the earth from space*) 2000 years ago, the devil had to work a lot harder to give Jesus a peek at all that the world had to offer. To be honest, I think it was a miracle that he pulled it off. But today, the devil needs no magic or supernatural aid. With just a few clicks of a button, a world wide web is literally at our fingertips. With 10 minutes and a little help from our tech-savvy friends, we can spread our images and ideas around the world – our faces will appear in a book millions around the world are currently reading. Today, any Dude can start a blog and sway the hearts and minds of people the world over. (*Graphic: The Emerging Brethren Dude Blog Banner*)

Threat #2 – Higher Education. (*Graphic: Bridgewater College Wallpaper*) Now I know many of you out there are teachers and educators. And there was a time when I believed that you were leading the way in fight against evil. But that, my friends, was before I had really paid attention to this story. Why didn't we see it before? The devil took the best guy in the class, led him to the heights of all knowledge and wisdom, and asked for a simple demonstration of what he had learned. And what did Jesus do? He refused to take the test. That was what finally made the devil flee – after Jesus was done with him, you might even say the devil was SOL.

Threat #1 – The Bible. (*Graphic: Bible*) I know what you are going to say – “Dude, the Bible is our greatest asset in the fight against the temptations of evil. After all, didn't Jesus use Bible verses to ward off each of the devil's temptations?” True, true. But if there is one thing that this story shows us it is that even the devil can quote scripture. And even though Jesus weaseled out of the devil's scripture trap by refusing to take the test, the clear witness of scripture here is that it can be dangerous when it falls into the wrong hands.

Which brings us to our next segment....

Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger

First up, a tip of my hat to the devil (*Graphic: Devil*) for a fantastic showing in his first match-up with the Son of God. While he didn't come away with a victory, he certainly showed us what he was made of: He got Jesus to meet him on *his* turf, he demonstrated mastery of space/time travel in showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in an instant, and he asserted authority over all the world without so much as a peep of protest from JC, showing an implicit acceptance of the devil's power and authority. And what's more, the evil one showed a willingness to roll the dice and go for the kill, and he nearly nailed Jesus when he quoted Psalm 91. I mean, this guy's got some cohunes.' He played Jesus at his own game and nearly took him down...

Which is why I must give a reluctant wag of my finger to Jesus Christ (*Graphic: Jesus*). Because when it was go time, and the chips were on the line, he wiffed on his chance to put the devil in his place. While he showed he could play some solid defense and ward off the devil's threats, he failed to demonstrate any offensive capacity whatsoever. It was like he was taking his cues from Jim Zorn. Come on Jesus, you had the devil right where you wanted him! You had to know he was reaching when the evil one pulled out the scripture quotes. It was a decent move on his part, but it *should* have been his undoing. The devil was clearly proof-texting, and he obviously didn't know or care about the context from which he quoted or he would have chosen more carefully. But instead of pointing out the logical fallacies of the devil's use of scripture and seizing the high ground in the show-down, Jesus again opted for a simple defensive maneuver, and this is where it gets really bad. Instead of quoting scripture as he had been doing, Jesus shifted to hearsay. Now I mean no disrespect to the Son of God – I am definitely rooting for him – but when the devil says to you, "Throw yourself down, for it is written that angels will protect you from all harm," at the very least, you need to come back with another "It is written...". But what does Jesus do? He says, "No, for someone once "said" that you shouldn't test God." "It is said..."?!! Was that the best he could do? What, did he not know that he was actually quoting Deuteronomy 6:16? Was he not sure that the words he was using were actually in the Bible? I can only chalk it up to exhaustion and fatigue in those late rounds. Otherwise, such a lapse would be inexcusable for the Son of God.

Well, in any event, I think the devil sniffed out a skunk in that exchange. And even though he didn't come away with the victory, he learned an important lesson in the exchange: Jesus obviously was not the biblical expert that everyone assumed he was. Why else would he not have affirmed that putting God to the test was, in fact, discouraged as written in the scriptures? And furthermore, what is with all the Deuteronomy? Every single one of Jesus' replies came from the same two chapters – Deuteronomy 6 and Deuteronomy 8 – even the one that Jesus apparently wasn't sure was written down at all. Looks an awful lot like someone cramming for an exam and trying to answer every question by stretching the material from the few pages they actually read! Jesus sure doesn't give me the impression here that he has mastered the breadth of the material.

So here is what I think happened – I think the devil realized this after Jesus' last reply, and decided to forfeit the match so that he could go home and do his homework. I think the devil realized that if he could learn the scriptures better himself, he would be in a much better position to take down not only Jesus, but many of the other faithful as well. So he left Jesus there, and went to master the written texts of scripture, with a sweeping new plan to threaten the cause of Christ at a later, more opportune time.

Now that, of course, is all speculation. Nowhere is it written in the story that the devil departed from Jesus with a grand plan to learn scripture better than even the Son of God. But who's to say what lies between the lines of scripture? The Dude, that's who. It's time for...

Yahweh or No Way?

First up, is the devil plotting a scripture based attack on Christ once more? As I have already said, I think we see evidence in Luke's temptation story that this was in the works. But at the same time, I think we can safely say that the devil isn't stupid, and Christ has come a long way in the past 2000 years. We are still continuing his work-out plan even today, and all the body-building has really paid off – Christ's strength is now roughly 2 billion times what it was in that first match up with the evil one. And while the devil has certainly improved his game, we can be sure that Jesus hasn't been resting either. So, would the devil be willing to risk a scripture based attack on the now much larger bodied-Christ? Yahweh or no Way?...

No Way!

There is no way the devil would be that stupid. To do so now would not only be foolish – it would be eschatological suicide. Every year, there are thousands of graduates from Bible Colleges and Seminaries around the world, and every day, millions consult the written words of scripture. And have you seen some of the study tools they have at their disposal? Commentaries, original languages tools, historical, critical, literary, redaction, and canonical studies. Why the followers of Christ today probably know more about the scriptures than the writers of scripture did themselves! In fact, since that first show-down in the wilderness Christ has become so dominant in scriptural interpretation, they've even added a whole new section of scriptures just for him. Think the devil could ever know that material better? I don't think so. Too bad, Lucifer, you missed your chance on this one.

But if that's the case then it begs the question, should Christ's followers still put so much effort into mastering the scriptures today? Wouldn't the time and energy spent learning the breadth of all that is written now be better spent working to develop effective strategies to counter other threats from the devil? After all, the devil's foray into the world of scripture has been a rather recent and I think we can now say temporary development. But he has countless other time-tested strategies at his disposal, and we've yet to find a wealth of consistently successful means to counter them. I mean – a short skirt and heels still gets me every time. So should we still be investing our time in nurturing our mastery of scripture? Yahweh or No Way?...

Yahweh!

The very reason that the threat of scriptural attack by the devil has been lessened today is because of the conspicuous strength shown by Christ in recent years in the area of scriptural mastery. But just because that specific threat has been contained, don't believe for a second that we are out of the woods. As I said at the outset, "Church, we live in a perilous time." Like Jesus in the wilderness before us, we are at a point of exhaustion after deflecting attack after attack after attack from the evil one. So let us not make the same mistake that Jesus made in that first match-up. Let us take a lesson from his quasi-victory, and prepare for an all out attack on the devil. Yes, church, let us take up our greatest weapon in the fight against evil, and launch a preemptive strike against the evil one. Let's put the Bible on the offensive. Which brings us to today's word:

The Word: It is Written (Text on right is projected after text on left is spoken)

Church, we have been preparing for this moment in time for over 500 years.	Actually, the Dude has been preparing for <i>this</i> moment for about 3 months.
When Johannes Gutenberg revolutionized the world of printing with his movable type press in the mid 1400s,	German technology: top of the line since 1440!
For the first time in our history, it became possible get the Bible into the hands of ordinary people. Until that time, the written word was a luxury that only people like me could afford to pursue.	The Dude abides...in the library?
But when it became possible to print books for the masses to read, the logistical problems in spreading the word were mitigated. Sure the Bible had to be translated into the native languages of everyone in the world...	Fewer all the time!
And sure everyone had to be taught to read these printed Bibles...	And nothing but those Bibles.
But it was the printing press that removed the impediments to Christ finally declaring the principle of <i>sola scriptura</i> as a binding law for his followers during the Protestant Reformation.	And led to the construction of those nifty pew racks in front of you (or beside you).
According to this principle, everything pertaining to the faith and practice of Christ's disciples was to be determined through scripture alone. No longer did the faithful need to be hindered in their interpretation and application of scripture by church tradition or biblical scholars.	Or sound logic. Or anyone else who knew what they were talking about.
Finally, anyone who could read could go directly to the Bible, and there find everything they needed to know about everything that was of any importance	Like how to avoid burning your retinas as you watch the sun rotate around the earth.
This was a strategy first successfully employed by Jesus in the wilderness when he warded off the temptations of the devil with the words of scripture.	Even if he wasn't sure some of them were written down.
And it has now become the bedrock principle of Bible believing people everywhere. And so with the conviction that "all scripture is God-breathed and useful"	2 nd Timothy 3:16

<p>We must now prepare ourselves to take the next step in the show-down with the evil one, and for Christ's sake, end this thing once and for all by taking advantage not only of scripture's ability to ward off threats from the devil, but also its latent potential to root out and destroy evil through preemptive intervention.</p>	<p>We CAN be both defensive and offensive at the same time!</p>
<p>All it takes is a willingness to carefully search the scriptures for clues about what we are to do.</p>	<p>And the ability to overlook any signs to the contrary.</p>
<p>And it is remarkably easy once you get the hang of it. Let me show you what I mean: Take the great evil of global warming. Clearly the devil is at work here, right?.</p>	<p>Heat does rise after all.</p>
<p>While some would have us believe that the threat is for people of faith to do nothing about this problem, a Bible believing person of faith knows better.</p>	<p>Obviously.</p>
<p>If you have any doubts, a closer look at a few scriptures prove it. First, Psalm 24:1 tells us that "The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it."</p>	<p>And who are we to question what God does with his private property?</p>
<p>And if that weren't enough to convince us that this is none of our business, check out Matthew 6, where it is written, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.... If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith.... So don't worry about tomorrow... today's trouble is enough for today."</p>	<p>Matthew 6:28b-c, 30, 34a,c</p>
<p>So you see, the clear witness of scripture is thus two fold: 1) don't worry about future stuff that is none of your business.</p>	<p>Like melting polar ice caps, catastrophic flooding, loss of habitat, the spread of disease bearing insects, unstable weather patterns, or the compromising of global fresh water sources.</p>
<p>And 2) God has been planning to toast nature all along. Why else would he be throwing good field grass into the oven?</p>	<p>Maybe to root out the snake in the grass?</p>

<p>But this is still just our time-tested way of looking to the Bible as a way of resisting temptation.</p>	<p>To take responsibility for our world and our effect on it.</p>
<p>Isn't there anything in the scriptures that could allow us not only to resist this temptation, but also to turn it into something we could use against the devil?</p>	<p>Oh boy here we go.</p>
<p>Of course there is. And we all know where to find it don't we? Why don't you all turn with me now to the book of Revelation, where God has given us his plans for the final battle with the devil. <i>(Open Bible)</i></p>	
<p>In Chapter 20, in the section conveniently titled "Satan's Doom" in my Bible, we find that Satan has just been released from prison, and has gathered his minions from around the world for battle. They've got the camp of the saints and the beloved city surrounded and then we read this beginning at the end of verse 9: <i>"And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."</i></p> <p>Now there you have it, clear as day, written right there for all to see. It is God's plan that the earth should become a giant toaster oven – a smoldering mass of sulfur lakes with fire raining down from the heavens. It's the only way to get rid of the devil. ☹️ So we need to do our part in accomplishing God's will. If we really want to stick it to the evil one, we will do everything we can to heat this green earth up in a hurry and so hasten the final defeat of evil, and usher in the coming of the new heaven and the new earth.</p>	<p>To replace the one we've sent to hell in a hand-basket so that all the bad people have plenty of room to burn for all eternity.</p>
<p><i>(Close Bible)</i> You see, it isn't that hard. Its all right here <i>(holding up the Bible)</i> in black and white, and occasionally red. And that's the word.</p>	<p>It is written.</p>

Postscript

Well, I hope that was as much fun for you as it was for me. And I hope you were able to take a little something away from it as well. Because the Bible is one of my great passions, but it is also one of my stumbling blocks in faith. It is my passion because it speaks to my heart of faith and has taught me some of my most cherished and firmly held life's lessons. And because I find the study of it riveting and compelling, always challenging and surprising me. But it is also my stumbling block because it has often been and is still so often misused and abused. I will confess that when I hear about a "Bible-believing church" or a "Bible College" or a "Bible conference", my first impressions are not favorable. When someone approaches the microphone at our District or Annual Conference with a Bible in hand, the red flags go up before they even speak. Why? Because for me, the Bible has become burdened with the negativity of judgmentalism, ignorance, hate-speech, and legalistic literalism.

I believe that one of the greatest temptations facing people of faith today is what to do with the Bible. We are tempted on one side to either to buy into a conservative right-wing ideology that seems bent on beating humanity over the head with its biblical judgments and apocalyptic rhetoric, and we are tempted on the other side to join the ranks of the left-leaning liberals who relativize and criticize the Bible to the point that its just another book, with no more authority or value than the next.

I chose to explore this text through satire today because I think such an approach can help us to resist the temptations that we face when we approach the biblical story. If we look at the narrative of Jesus' temptation and start asking questions like, "Did this really happen?" or "Why do Matthew and Luke record the temptations in a different order?" or "Why aren't such stories in the other gospels?" or "Does the original Greek actually have Jesus responding to the devil's last temptation in Luke with "It is said" rather than "it is written?" we are missing the point don't you think? As interesting and rewarding as pursuing those questions may be, don't you think the Bible has more to offer us than answers to those kinds of questions?

We make a mistake when we read the Bible like we read other books. Just like we make a mistake when we listen to Satire the same way we listen to a lecture. The scriptures are not meant to be read like a history or as a plan for the end of time. They are not meant to be approached as we would a science textbook or a code of law or ethics. Perhaps the best way to see them is as if they were an old family photo album, or your great-great grandmother's journal. For in these, as in the scriptures, we learn about something that is much bigger than our selves; we discover something of who we are and where we have come from, and we just might be inspired to find our place in the story and to continue it with our own chapter. And that would be good news indeed. Amen.

Charge and Blessing

1. Hear, O Church a charge and a blessing inspired by those words of Deuteronomy that guided Jesus during his wilderness time:

2. The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

1. You shall love the LORD your God with all your hearts,

2. with all your souls,

1. and with all your might.

2. Hold fast to the word that you have come to know;

1. Share it with your children – at home and everywhere you go;

2. Make it a priority – morning, noon and night.

1. Make it central in your lives – in who you are and how you live.

2. So that when God speaks, we will have ears to hear.

1. May it be so...