

First Sunday in Lent

6th March 2022

Luke 5:1-13

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Uh Oh

This morning is the first Sunday in Lent in the church calendar. Lent comprises the 40 days from Ash Wednesday, which was this past week, to Jesus' crucifixion, not counting the Sundays in there. The idea is that Christians spend 40 days in a kind of spiritual wilderness of personal inventory and introspection emulating Jesus' 40 days in the desert in our reading this morning.

You've heard me say often that the Bible should be read literarily, not literally – that is, as a collection of stories, parables, and poetry, some of which is based on his-

torical events, but none of which is meant to be read as a reference work or a history textbook. But some of those stories are almost certainly reflective of events that took place.

Forty days in the desert being tempted by Satan may be more of a parable, but a first century itinerant rabbi named Jesus, or Yeshua in Aramaic, being crucified in Jerusalem for his opposition to the Roman Empire, that's likely an historical event.

I mention that because while I think our reading this morning is a parable, it serves the purpose of setting up the very opposition to

empire that would end up getting Jesus executed by Rome three short years later. Only in this story, the role of empire is played by Satan.

The conflict between the values espoused by Jesus and those of empire continued to fuel the persecution of those seeking to follow the path of Jesus for the next three centuries. Sometimes that persecution was little more than social exclusion for different practices and beliefs. Other times it took the form of state sanctioned violence, incarceration, and death. And while there were plenty of variations in early Christian practice and belief, many early Christians continued to espouse teachings that challenged and undermined the interests of the wealthy and ruling classes.

As an aside, if those early Christian movements of the first few centuries interests you, I invite you to join our

Thursdays with Jesus book group. We're reading a book right now published by the Jesus Seminar last year titled, *After Jesus, Before Christianity*, that explores this very topic.

In the fourth century, however, the dominant expression of Christianity underwent a dramatic change. The Roman emperor, Constantine the Great, put Christian symbols on the shields of his soldiers, and his armies prevailed in a civil war. Believing this was a sign that the Christian God was the most powerful, Constantine passed the Edict of Milan, legalising Christianity throughout the empire, and effectively ending persecution of Christians. Sixty-seven years later, with the Edict of Thessalonica, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Thus, Christianity became the religion of empire. Con-

stantine brought the church into the imperial system. He made the church one of the Empire's institutions. I don't think the Church changed the Empire. The Empire remained violent, it continued to siphon wealth away from the poor colonies and give it to wealthy Roman citizens. It did not concern itself unduly for the poor or the outcast. It created poverty, in fact, to support the conquering armies. It remained hierarchical, sexist, all that stuff.

We still live in a society with almost all of those same characteristics. The church did not change the empire. I think the Empire changed the church. And that, I believe, is the great challenge the church is facing today. Christianity is still in bed with empire, and the temptations of empire that Jesus challenged in the wilderness are the very same tempta-

tions that keep the church from being an authentic witness to the teachings of Jesus today. The accusations of hypocrisy rightly levied at Christianity today are the result of our 1700-year marriage to empire.

One of the very effective tactics Constantine used in transforming the church was to change some of the core stories of Christianity, so that instead of being a thorn in the side of Empire, the church would become a supporter, a pillar, of the Empire. And he did a great job of it. He made the church a hierarchical institution. Jesus said "don't lord it over each other," but now in the church there were presbyters, bishops, archbishops and so forth. Constantine also got the church paying particular attention to correct beliefs: this is what you must believe or you're out. He got the church to make

religion into a set of requirements and privileges, like citizenship in the Empire.

And at the end of the day, we found ourselves in a situation where the church could support the Crusades, wars of conquest and revenge against people of other religions. We found ourselves in a situation where the church could provide the theological underpinnings for colonial conquest, slavery, forced conversions, land theft. The church could look the other way or even provide a rationale for the subjugation of women, domestic violence. You know the story.

In the early days, Christians refused military service. Now, services celebrating patriotic holidays are held in church. We have changed; we've moved from being a challenger of Empire, a counterforce to the status quo, and now we have

become a pillar upholding the status quo. Uh, oh.

The Scriptural story today is about the temptation of Jesus. While the details vary, the temptation story appears in three of the four gospels as the event that begins Jesus' ministry. In Luke's version, that we heard this morning, Jesus is presented with choices, options, about the shape of his ministry. And those choices stand in stark contrast to the values of the Empire church that modern Christianity embodies. Somewhere along the way, the Empire church reversed those decisions of Jesus, and went with Satan's option. Uh, oh, again.

Let's start with the first one. Jesus has been fasting, and he's hungry. Really hungry. "No problem," says Satan. If you are the Son of God, just turn these stones to bread! Not to mention that if you turn these stones

to bread, you can not only feed yourself, but you can feed every hungry person on earth. Think about that.

It's not a bad idea! Food banks, ARM, Loaves and Fishes...think of all the things we do to feed the hungry. It's a good idea. When I was a kid in the 80's, there was this big movement called LiveAid—it was the biggest concert on earth, and brought together all these popular singers to perform a song called “We Are the World.” It was done to raise money to fight global poverty. In that song, Willie Nelson sings the line, “as God has shown us, by turning stones to bread.” Except that wasn't God. That was the Devil. But it's a good idea, right?

“Wrong,” says Jesus. Not that it's a bad idea to share food. Jesus did that all the time. But he says, “people do not live on bread alone.”

In Matthew's version, he adds: “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

When meeting needs becomes the mission of the church, we essentially become a tool of the Empire, who creates the needs in the first place. Dom Helder Camara from Brazil said it this way: “when I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why it is that the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

Poverty is not an inevitable thing! It's the result of our politics, the way we have structured society. Other societies have done better! Some accounts of the early church groups say that the earliest church was a society in which “there was not a needy person among them.” A ministry of meeting needs can create dependencies, challenge the dignity of the receivers, and cover over the

injustices of a society. No – there’s more to the gospel than bread, more than meeting needs. But if we stick to the food bank, it’s a help for the Empire.

How about the second temptation? That’s a lot more direct. Satan shows Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world.” They’re all mine, he says, and I can give you all that power. Just worship me and you can get stuff done.

This is basically the bargain that Constantine offered the church! Get in bed with power, become part of the empire, and you can get what you want! This has been the choice of the evangelical political right. The end justifies the means. GET POWER, and then we can make the right stuff happen. If we make the rules, we can make the right rules.

It does make sense, doesn’t it? And over, and over, and

over again, the church has taken the devil’s bargain. It hasn’t worked very well. Instead of the church redeeming power, it seems that power has corrupted the church. And we end up with justifications of slavery and apartheid, we end up with colonial oppression, Crusades, laws that privilege power ostensibly justified by the Bible. Some of the cruelest, most violent, most vile governments and empires have been religious ones – ISIS, the Catholic Kings in Spain.

“No,” said Jesus. Worship the Lord your God and serve only God. Because what we get done is not the only thing that matters. What maybe matters more is who we are becoming. And worship, spiritual practice, is about who we are becoming.

And the third temptation. This is often the one I struggle to understand. Satan

brings Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple, and says, “throw yourself down! Because God has promised to protect you! The angels will guard you. On their hands they will bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone...Imagine how people will listen to you if they see that,” claims Satan.

Jesus says, “No. Do not tempt the Lord your God.” Don’t make God into some kind of an errand-boy, some kind of a guardian angel to keep us safe or to cater to our desires and plans, to put on a show, to attract the multitudes.

What’s this temptation about? Maybe being safe? Maybe thinking that God’s purpose in our lives is to keep us safe, popular, well-liked, respected? I don’t know. Is this temptation about being in competition for the crowds, wanting to put on the best show so peo-

ple will flock to our church instead of the others? Maybe God will do signs and wonders, so that our church can be successful.

I don’t know. Jesus sent his disciples out, he said, as sheep among wolves. Vulnerable, because vulnerability is an essential part of love. But by and large, the church has avoided vulnerability in favor of safety. And safety in any society means not rocking the boat. Not challenging the authorities.

Maybe this is an ancient parable about Jesus’ challenges to empire that led to his crucifixion, but it feels uncomfortably relevant to the challenges we are still facing today. We live in a society in which “normal” is making us unhappy, destroying the environment, dividing us into violent camps, and concentrating wealth in a very, very few hands. We live in a church in which

“normal” means we are at odds with the teaching of Jesus! For years, we’ve heard that the church is in decline because worship isn’t jazzy or exciting enough. But I think we’re in decline because the world can see the difference between Jesus and the church.

So, here’s what I propose for us this Lent. Let’s explore these temptations of empire and consider how we might begin to divorce Constantine, how we might give up normal and cancel our bargain with the devil, how we might take up the teachings of Jesus in some fresh way. It’s a big thing, giving up normal, following Jesus. But like any journey, I think it starts with one step in the right direction. That’s what I hope for this Lent. AMEN.