

Palm Sunday

10th April 2022

Luke 19:28-40

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Two Parades

The first Sunday of Lent, which happened to be the first Sunday in March, we read the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by Satan. We've suggested that those temptations mirror the temptations that the church has faced and continues to face from empire—turning stones to bread, or a temptation to unlimited wealth and resources; throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple to let God save him, or a temptation to avoid the consequences of our actions.

This morning we're going to look at the remaining temptation—the temptation

to claim power so that we can use it for our purposes.

In the desert story, Satan leads Jesus up on a high mountain and shows him all the empires of the world. Satan says to Jesus, "to you I will give all their glory and power and authority, if only you worship me."

First, you kind of have to appreciate how honest Satan is in this one. All the empires of the world belong to him. There is no pretense, no deception, no misleading anyone about empire. They all—all the empires and kingdoms of the world—they all belong to Satan.

The bargain Satan is of-

fering is that Jesus can have the resources of empire, the power of the kingdoms of the world, to use for his purposes. He just has to, quite literally, sell his soul to do it.

The bargain the church made with Constantine in the fourth century was that very same temptation that Jesus resisted. The church aligned itself with the Roman empire, became a tool of the empire, and rather than using that power to change empire, the power changed the church.

When Jesus' disciples argued over which of them was the greatest, Jesus warned them not to become corrupted in a pursuit of power, later proclaiming that the first would be last and the last, first in the kingdom of God. But the church developed hierarchies and became an institution of power. Not that people within the church didn't

continue to pursue the path of Jesus. Many did and continued to eschew power and wealth in favor of serving others. But as an institution, the church began to look more and more like the Roman empire.

What about today, though? The institutional church is in decline in the northern hemisphere. Our numbers are dwindling every year. Our resources are not what they were a generation or two ago. Are we ready to finally divorce Constantine after 1700 years?

In 1998, evangelist Franklin Graham, son of the late Billy Graham, responded to former president Bill Clinton's extramarital relationship with Monica Lewinsky with an opinion piece in "The Wall Street Journal" castigating Clinton for his sexual immorality, lies, and adultery. Graham argued that Clinton's behavior was

not consistent with the gospel or with Christian virtue, both traits that were critically important to our nation's leader.

Eighteen years later, in the wake of Donald Trump's revelations of his own sexual immorality and unrepentant assault of numerous women, rather than criticizing Trump's behavior, Graham defended him. Instead of calling out Trump as an immoral adulterer like Clinton, he backed Trump and suggested that, while Trump's "crude comments" could not be defended, the most important issue to any Christian should be stopping the "godless progressive agenda of Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton" and getting conservative judges on the Supreme Court.

Here is an internationally known church leader, someone who runs one of the biggest charities in the world

– Samaritan's Purse – and solicits millions of dollars' worth of donations for Operation Christmas Child every year, who proclaims that the most important concern for any American Christian should not be the behavior of our elected officials, but how we, the church, can use that elected official to gain power in pursuit of the goals of evangelical Christianity.

Get in bed with power so you can get what you want. That's the temptation Satan offered Jesus, and it was the clearest of the three Jesus faced. It's also one the evangelical right has unabashedly embraced.

For a while, I kept hearing that people like Franklin Graham, who defended Trump's behavior, were actually driving people away from the church. But a 2021 report published by the Pew Research Center showed that was not the case. In-

stead, white Americans who viewed Trump favorably were more likely to begin identifying as born-again or evangelical Christians. People who did not identify as religious in 2016, but favored Trump, started to identify as religious because of him. In other words, Trump drew more people to church and grew the ranks of white evangelicalism.

We began Lent by suggesting that when the church gets in bed with empire, the church doesn't change empire. Empire changes the church. Every one of the temptations Jesus faced was to embrace the deceptions of empire. He knew that was a losing battle. But the church has largely decided that we could do better than Jesus did. That we could embrace those temptations and somehow still triumph over them rather than succumb to them.

We failed. Rather than triumphing over the temptations of empire, the church became an institution that defended racism, shunned immigrants, stifled curiosity and scientific advancement, and denounced diversity in the name of a white male God. The church didn't change empire. Empire changed the church.

Perhaps one of the clearest ways to see this is to think about how often you hear about someone changing churches because the church doesn't match their politics. Compare that to how many people change their politics because the politics don't match what they experience in church.

The temptation to get in bed with empire was the second of three that Jesus faced, but it's the one we saved for last – for the final Sunday of Lent. I did that because the events of Palm Sunday and

the week that follow, leading up to Jesus' execution at the hands of empire, all are perhaps the clearest depiction we have of the lengths to which Jesus went to reject the power of empire.

Palm Sunday is named as such because the reading we hear every year on the Sunday preceding Easter is of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey in a parade mocking the pageantry and militaristic display of the Roman Empire. Around 200 years earlier, a Jewish revolt had chased the Romans out of Jerusalem, and Jews continued to hold a celebration of that victory every year. Which meant that every year at that time, Rome would stage its own parade of imperial cavalry and soldiers, with the governor sitting at the head, and march into Jerusalem to make sure everyone understood who had the real power.

Pilate and the Roman army march in from the west. Jesus and his followers stage their humble parade from the east—an unmistakable affront to Rome's ostentatious display of military power. And thus, Jesus' rejection of the temptation to get in bed with imperial power came full circle. And ended the only way it could have—with the empire showing its strength by executing Jesus.

How did the church go from following a poor rabbi who chose to be executed by empire rather than succumb to its temptations, to being, for 17 centuries, an instrument of that very empire? We took the devil's bargain. As with each of the temptations, we thought we could do better than Jesus. We thought we could fight for power, no matter the cost, and when we got it, then use it to reshape the world to

the vision of the church.

Power doesn't work that way. It never has. As British philosopher and moralist Lord Acton wrote over a century ago, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

When I preached the first sermon in this series, several of you asked me on the way out of church why turning stones to bread was a bad thing. Why, if we had the means to magically generate enough food to feed every hungry person in Carter County or East Tennessee or wherever, why would that be a bad thing? And honestly, I struggled with that question myself. If I could feed everyone, why wouldn't I? If I had the power of empire and could make changes, why wouldn't I claim it? Pass universal healthcare and social safety nets and real progress

to address climate change.

Why not claim the power and the money to do those things?

That was the very bargain offered to Jesus. And he declined. And the only answer I can come up with is because I think he was wise enough to know that no one, not even he, had the ability to use the tools of empire that way. Maybe they're too great a temptation. Or maybe they are just the wrong tools for the job. Turning stones to bread isn't necessary to feed everyone. We already have enough food to do that. We just need to manage it better. To work together. To waste less and share more.

The result isn't the only thing that matters...the way we live matters more—who we are becoming. Palm Sunday was the inevitable conclusion of Jesus' rejection of empire, framed as a choice

between two parades—one of singing peasants and children and their impossible, dangerous vision, the other reinforcing the world of power and empire. Palm Sunday confronts us with the same choice: which vision of power will rule our lives? To which kingdom will we belong? Which parade will we join?

Amen.

