

“Not This”

Sermon on Luke 4:1-13

March 6, 2022

One of the last things to be done when moving into a new home is hanging the artwork. I tend to rush into this too hastily. Art on the walls is what really makes a place feel like home, feel like my space, and in my haste to get to that feeling, I often put the art in a spot that isn't quite right, and end up moving it a few weeks later, leaving holes in the walls all over the place.

So I tried to be better about it this time around. I leaned art pieces up against the wall and let them sit there for a few weeks, moving them around slowly, switching one out for another, as I shifted my furniture around slightly, trying to get everything just right. And then, when I felt like I maybe had a good idea for it all, I had to wait until my parents came to visit so they could hold up paintings and I could step back, tilt my head, and find just the right spot for each piece.

Turns out there were still a lot of decision to be made when mum and dad started holding pictures up against the wall. They'd hold up a picture, I'd ponder, and then shake my head. “Nope,” I'd say, “this one doesn't go here.” They'd hold up another picture. “No, not this either,” I'd say. We'd repeat this a couple times, swapping things out, me saying, “Not this...not this...not this...” until finally I was looking at a painting that felt right.

A lot of our decision making, in an attempt to get at the right thing, involves first saying no to the wrong things. We try on clothes, read the specs on power tools, press our thumbs into the skin of an avocado. “Not this...not this...not this” we say, before we find the shirt that fits just right, the drill that will compliment our existing tool collection, the

avocado that will be perfectly ripe when we make guacamole in two days.

Saying “yes” to something often means saying “no” to something else, and this is true of the temptation of Jesus. This is a story of obedience, a story of the perfection of Jesus...but at its heart, I think this is a story about choice. A story of Jesus choosing – and declaring – what kind of Messiah he will be, and almost as importantly, what kind of Messiah he will *not* be.

[Image 1 – baptism] Our story takes place immediately after Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. The Gospel of Mark makes this very clear – after the voice from heaven declares to Jesus “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased,” we’re told, “At once – immediately - the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.”

Why does that matter? As we’ve just said, in his baptism, Jesus is named by the voice from heaven as “my beloved Son.” The title – “Son of God” was sometimes used in the Old Testament to refer to the king. In the ancient world especially, sons were seen to represent their fathers, and so the King, as “Son of God” was thought to represent God on earth, hopefully in obedience to God. Thus the king had earthly power, divinely bestowed power.

Satan calls this title into question twice in the Temptation narrative. “If you are the Son of God,” he says to Jesus, “prove it. If you indeed have this divinely bestowed power, if you have this power over the earth, show us.”

But Satan knows who Jesus is. He knows that Jesus does have this power. And so the question behind his temptations, his testing, is not “Do you have this divinely bestowed power,” but rather, “what does this power look like?”

The question is not “Is Jesus King,” but “What kind of King is Jesus?” The first thing that happens after Jesus receives his baptismal identity is a test of that identity.

And as Jesus answers each of Satan’s challenges, he shows Satan, and us, what his power, what his kingship, looks like. With every declaration of “it’s not this,” he shows us what it is.

[Image 2 – bread temptation] The devil tells Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” This is a rather logical place to start, given that Jesus has been without food for forty days. He’s hungry. He wants bread. Needs bread. I don’t think any of us would begrudge Jesus for turning the stone in front of him into a steak dinner, never mind a loaf of bread.

But this temptation isn’t really about bread, or hunger. The question the devil is posing is, “Will Jesus exploit his power, his Sonship, for his own benefit? Will he look out for himself, and use his power for his own gain? Will his kingship look like the selfish reigns of so many of Israel’s kings before him?”

Jesus shakes his head. “No,” he says. “It’s not this.” **[Image 3 – response]** He quotes Deuteronomy: “Man shall not live on bread alone.” Jesus will rely on the Father for all he needs, will trust that God gives his children everything they require. Jesus’ kingship looks like trust.

[Image 4 – kingdom temptation] The devil tries again. He takes Jesus up to a high place, and casts a vision of all the kingdoms of the world. “Worship me,” he says, “and I will give you power and authority over everything.”

Like the temptation to make food wasn’t really about food but about trust, this temptation isn’t really about authority, but about

compromise. Jesus *will* be King of all the earth. After his resurrection, when he gives the disciples the great commission, he tells them “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” This is the trajectory Jesus is on when he begins his ministry, so the question is not “Will Jesus have authority,” but “How will Jesus come by that authority?” Will he wait, and be patient, and endure the cross, submitting himself to the Father’s will? Or will he take the easy way out, and seize power when it’s offered to him here, and now, with no sacrifice required? Will he be a king of convenience?

Jesus shakes his head. “No, he says, “not this.” **[Image 5 – response]** And he quotes Deuteronomy again, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” Jesus will serve the Father, and do the Father’s will, and trust that the Kingdom of God will come about when and how God has ordained it, even if that ultimately requires sacrifice.

[Image 6 – temple temptation] Satan has one more go at it. He takes Jesus up to the very highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here and let the angels save you.” The question behind this temptation is: Is Jesus invincible? Will Jesus rely on his power to protect himself from all danger, all threat, save him even from death?

One last time, Jesus shakes his head. “No, he says, “my kingship is not this.” **[Image 7 – response]** One last time, he quotes Deuteronomy, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Jesus will not be a king whose power is made evident through strength and fortitude. Jesus’ power is made perfect in weakness. Jesus’ kingship will be upside down and backwards. Jesus will travel *towards* death, not away from it; he will seek not to escape death, but to accept death, and thus defeat death’s power.

Three times, a vision of what Jesus' kingship could look like is held up to him. Three times he says, "Not this." Jesus knows what his vocation, his calling, his ministry, is. **[Image 8 – baptism]** He knows that in his baptism he was called into a life of vulnerability, sacrifice, submission to God, and love. Ultimately he knows that his power is not his own, but is divinely bestowed, a gift of the Holy Spirit. And is thus to be used in accordance with God's plans, not his own.

When Jesus told the disciples he had been given authority over heaven and earth, he gave them a commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all I have commanded you." The last four weeks, we've looked at four different aspects of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, what it looks like to follow Jesus.

Each of us, in our baptisms, have been called into this discipleship, into ministry. We have been claimed by God and set apart by God for lives lived in his kingdom. We are filled with the same Spirit that came upon Christ in his baptism. In our words of assurance this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans we heard that this Spirit "testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. And if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

In our baptism, we are declared to be children of God. The voice from heaven declares to us "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter." And so ours, too, is the call to represent God here on earth, to live in obedience to God, to be stewards of his divine power.

For us, too then, is the question, the choice: what kind of disciples will we be? How will we steward this power? What will it look like for us to be sons and daughters of the Father?

[Image 9 – first temptation] The first temptation was about trust, about Jesus' willingness to rely on God, not his own power. I wonder how you and I are confronted by this choice, by this temptation, in our own lives.

When we stand in need of something, is our first instinct to jump to action, to try and figure it all our ourselves, to be busy and productive, or do we take that first step of prayer? Do we live in frenetic anxiety, just barely keeping despair at bay, or do our lives reveal an inner calm and peace that comes from trusting that God holds the whole world in his hands?

As churches, do we jump at each new trend, and respond to each new crisis, and pivot around each new cultural reality in an attempt to be relevant, to keep members, to grow, or do we center our lives around prayer, and Scripture, and community, listening for the voice of God as he guides us and directs us through changing landscapes?

[Image 10 – second temptation] The second temptation was about compromise and patience, about Jesus' willingness to wait for God to accomplish his plans in his time and in his way. This, I think, is a particularly prevalent temptation for the Church. And it's tricky because this temptation sneaks into our lives disguised as something that's ultimately good. We *want* to see the kingdom of God. We want to see every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. We want for the whole world to know the glory of God.

But in our haste to see this realized, we can end up compromising our faith. We attach ourselves to political agendas that might promise us a voice, but are not ultimately kingdom serving. We weaponize religion, using faith language to compel and control people. In a post-Christian world, we clutch at the power the Church once held as we fear – and rightly lament – an ever-secularizing society. But as we're clutching at

power, are we distracted from the ways in which God is yet accomplishing his purposes, yet displaying his sovereignty?

[Image 11 – third temptation] And finally, the third temptation was about vulnerability, about Jesus' willingness to go towards death, not run from it. This, certainly, is a challenge for us. We all desire health, happiness, security – we want to believe that we are invincible. *And*, we want to believe – or deep down *do* believe - that if we're good enough Christians, if our faith is strong enough, if we do all the right things – that God will of course keep us from all harm.

But the life we're called to as co-heirs of Christ, says Paul, is a sharing in his suffering. A sharing in his glory, yes. But first, a life of sacrifice, of laying down our own wants and desires for the sake of the other. Of turning the other cheek instead of seeking revenge. Of giving away our wealth instead of hoarding it. Of seeking to understand the other instead of seeking only to be understood. Of stepping into discomfort in order to bring the good news of God's presence to those shouldering heavy burdens.

Each day we are faced with choices. Who will we be today? What kind of Christian will we be?

And those choices boil down, ultimately, to this question: Is Christ truly Lord over our lives? Do we seek God, and God alone, or do our other desires, our other wants, our other beliefs, have mastery over us?

[Image 12 – desert] It's no accident that Jesus was tempted in a desert. Wildernesses – vast, open wastelands – are regular places for God to reveal himself to his people, or to reveal something *about* the people to themselves. In a place free of distractions, free of all the other voices that call out to us, tempting us, clamoring for our attention and our allegiance – in this place we are left with just ourselves. We can

examine ourselves, search our heart, and ask ourselves, “When faced with all the options, who will we be? What must we say ‘no’ to; ‘not this,’ in order to choose God and God alone? In order to make space in our lives for the Spirit of fullness?”

[Image 13 – quote] Joan Sauro, a Catholic nun and author, in her book *Whole Earth Meditation*, refers to our inner selves as a landscape, as earth. She writes this: “Go to the place called barren. Stand in the place called empty. And you will find God there. The Spirit of God breathes everywhere within you, just as in the beginning, filling light place and dark...green earth and dry. Thus does God renew the face of the earth. God always breaks through at your weakest point, where you least resist. God’s love grows, fullness upon fullness, where you crumble enough to give what is most dear. Your earth.”

[Image 14 – desert] And so on this first Sunday of Lent, we step into the wilderness. We journey with Jesus into the desert, so that we may be found by God there. So we may come to know God there, as we come to know ourselves, examining all the beliefs and desires and practices that live within us, taking up real estate in our souls, and naming the ones that are not, ultimately, of God. Saying, “not this, not this, not this,” so we make way for *this*. **[Image 14 – river in desert]** For the Spirit of truth and life. For the love of God. For the peace that comes from trusting in God and God alone. For the joy that comes from relinquishing our whole lives to the Lordship of Christ.

Would you pray with me?

And so, Lord God, lead us into the wilderness.

Fill us with your Spirit, and strengthen us for the task of self-examination,

of looking inward, our lives and hearts revealed to us by the light of your guiding and presence.

In this season of Lent, we particularly pray that you would help us to see clearly -
to see our sin and turn from it, to see your love and run towards it, to see the life of Jesus and emulate it.
Go with us in the wilderness, God.
Lead us always by your hand.
Amen.