



A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent Ephesians 2:1-10

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Week after week, I see Pastor Bill preaching the Bible to you on Sundays, and I want to commend him to you. I'm not sure you are aware how rare it is to have a pastor who does his own translation work in the Hebrew and Greek, and who attempts, with diligence and great effort, to read the text of the Bible anew, divide it up properly, and serve it to you. What matters to Pastor Bill in his preaching to you is *what the Bible actually says* — the actual point of the gospels' stories, or the actual meaning of the prophecies of the prophets, or the actual meaning of Paul's arguments in his letters — **not what famous theologians** have used the Bible to say, or what scholastic medieval philosophy says it can and cannot mean, or the way modern self-help gurus can use Bible verses out of context to tell a very different story. If you attend to the words delivered from this pulpit, you are being trained to understand the Bible on its own terms, rather than watching as a slick speaker uses the Bible to express his own ideas. The story needs to be your story; you are to think of yourself as a child of Abraham, as a sharer in Israel's Messiah, as someone in covenant with Israel's God.

Since it is the first Sunday in Lent, we are confronted with the very first episode of Jesus' public ministry after his baptism by John the Baptist. This story has much to teach us about Jesus' work as the Messiah, the nature of his sufferings, and ultimately, the way we ought to think about God Himself.

I want to start by thinking about what it means when **the**

Messiah goes into the desert. In Acts 21, when Paul is arrested in Jerusalem, the Roman centurion is surprised that he knows Greek: "Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" -Acts 21:38 (I joke to my Greek students that knowing Greek is handy if you are ever suspected of being a terrorist.) In Acts 5, Gamaliel mentioned Judas of Galilee and Theudas, false messiahs who also started their rebellions against Rome by going out into the wilderness. Why do so many messiahs begin this way? Because they are attempting **recapitulate of Israel's story**. And the true Messiah also relives the story of Israel, embodying it in the events that happen to him: he has already gone down to Egypt to escape a tyrannical attempt to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem, much as Pharaoh tried to kill all the male Hebrew babies; he has already been baptized in the Jordan, as Paul says Israel was "baptized in the cloud and in the sea" of the Exodus; and now he goes into the Wilderness to be tempted for 40 days, as Israel was tempted for 40 years. Covenant history rhymes, as the saying goes.

So that is why Jesus is in the desert. There remains explain why he is being tested, and how he resists that temptation, and what these things tell us about the Messiah and about God.

We must recognize that Jesus resisted Satan's temptation as true man, as **a matter of his messianic office**. Jesus' self-understanding as the Messiah was in terms of the latter chapters of Isaiah, i.e. **the suffering servant**. This understanding of his calling is why he girded himself with a towel and **washed his disciples' feet** at the Last Supper; it is why he set his **face like flint** to go to Jerusalem; it is why he undertakes to drink the **cup of suffering**, and sheds **sweat like drops of blood** falling to the ground during his agonized prayer in Gethsemane. Being this kind of Messiah involved contradicting the expectations that other men had about what the Messiah would be like. When Jesus is on trial,

the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, for instance, asks him — in a question whose statement-like word order indicates incredulity — "*You* are the king of the Jews?" (that is the word order, sarcastic or incredulous), and then puts over his head a sign reading "Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews," in three languages, so that everyone could get the joke. Pilate mocks Jewish pretensions to even have a king. That is why he refused to change the sign to say only "He claimed to be the king of the Jews." It is also why he also brings out Barabbas and asks the Jews, "Whom do you want me to give to you? Barabbas, or the king of the Jews?"

Pilate is operating with the standard **pagan understanding of kingship**: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28) Pontius Pilate and the Romans were expecting someone taller, perhaps. Of course, Jesus *could have* met those expectations, as he told the soldiers who arrested him in Gethsemane: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53) It isn't that he *couldn't* just blow the Romans away with fire from heaven. But that is not his agenda. That is not what the Messiah has come to do. He has come "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus also has to correct the **expectation of the Jews** about what the Messiah is to be like — even the expectation of his own disciples! It is this self-understanding that makes Jesus tell his disciples in Mt 16:22-23 that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to

rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Peter's suggestion that Jesus could be the Messiah without suffering and dying is so inimical to Jesus' self-understanding and his mission that he calls Peter "Satan." And rightly so, because what Peter is suggesting is pretty much of the same spirit as what Satan himself suggests in our gospel lesson this morning.

So that is the background: Jesus as the true Israelite, the Messiah, is in the desert, not to lead a rebellion or a gang of terrorists, but to be tested as Israel was tested. Against all this background, we are ready to hear the words, both of Satan tempting, and of Jesus answering, and hear them with richer and fuller meaning — meaning not from Greek philosophy or self-help gurus or even systematic theologians, but rather, from the story of Israel.

With his first temptation, Satan seeks to **exploit Jesus' hunger**:

"The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:3-4)

Any of you who have ever been **hangry** know exactly why Satan is doing this. Jesus, no less than we, lived his earthly incarnate life *in a body*, and that body was subject to weakness. Jesus is not like Superman, so that bullets or nails would bounce off his skin. He was capable of suffering, and he did suffer. Satan is suggesting that Jesus should exploit his Messianic status — for that is what is meant by "If you are the Son of God" — and use it to avoid this suffering. Take your authority over all creation and use it to transform stones into bread. This is not a ridiculous

suggestion. It is similar to Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel, where he turned water into wine for the wedding at Cana. But the aim of the action here would be quite different. Satan's meaning is basically the same as Peter's suggestion: "Suffer from hunger? Why put up with that? This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus' answer is a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3. (In fact, all three of Jesus' answers to Satan are from Deuteronomy. (Dt. 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13). That is, they are taken from Moses' instructions to Israel about how to live with the Lord. Jesus is the one who follows Deuteronomy's description of the faithful Israelite perfectly.) As so often, however, Jesus' quotations of the Old Testament are *metaleptic* — a fancy Greek word that means "takes along with it." The idea here is that if I say, "We stand on guard for thee," it would be a mistake for someone to try to understand that utterance merely by using a dictionary to look up "stand" and "guard" and so forth. The meaning of that phrase is rather to be found in the larger context of the Canadian national anthem as a whole, because that is how everyone who hears it will immediately start thinking in their minds: all the other verses will come flooding into your minds; you will perhaps recall occasions when you sang it: in school, or at sporting events; or watching a Olympic medal ceremony. Just so, when Jesus quotes the Old Testament, every Israelite hearer will not just think of the words he quotes; he will think also of the surrounding context, the story in which those words first occurred. So when we look at Deuteronomy 8:3, we should also think about the immediately preceding verse:

"The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in

the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not." (Deuteronomy 8:1-2)

And *then* it goes on to say, in the **very next verse**, "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that *man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*" (Deuteronomy 8:3) This is what Jesus has in mind: he has been in the wilderness for forty days, being humbled, being tested. He answers Satan from **the very passage of Deuteronomy that has to do with his situation**: it is about testing in the wilderness. He has been thinking about this verse for a while now.

The tempter's second try is with a more showy possibility:

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" - Matthew 4:6

This would be an impressive display! Who could fail to follow a Messiah who had made such a proof of divine power? Jesus had answered the first temptation by quoting Scripture. But the devil can quote Scripture for his purposes, so Satan appeals to lines from Psalm 91:11-12. And again, he knows what he is doing: at a time when Jesus feels alone, when he is in the desert, Satan tempts him with lines from that most comforting song: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty." It is full of promises of God's protection and deliverance: in battle, from wild animals, from dangerous diseases. And yet it is singularly inappropriate for Jesus'

messianic vocation: He has come to suffer and die. To avail himself of divine protection against these sufferings would be to deny his messiahship.

So Jesus replies with words from Deuteronomy again.

"Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" - Matthew 4:7

This is from Deuteronomy 6, that chapter which contains **the Shema**, the single verse of the Torah that could be called the creed of Israel: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." It is the core chapter of the Torah about Israel's relationship with God. He has rescued her from Egypt and taken her to Himself to be His bride; at Mount Sinai, he has married her.

But Israel was not faithful. She tested the Lord like a wife acting up to trying to make her husband angry. When there was no water to drink, Exodus 17 says, "Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.' And Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?'" (Exodus 17:2) The verb used here, and also by Jesus in Matthew 4:7, is **πειράζω**.

Note well: **Who was doing the testing** in the wilderness for 40 years? Exodus and Deuteronomy say it clearly: Israel was testing YHWH. And thus, we may perceive some clever irony in Jesus' answer to Satan here. For Satan is called "the tempter," and in Greek, that is nothing other than a participle form of this same verb **πειράζω**, literally, "the testing one." So on the one hand, Jesus' quotation of Deuteronomy 6:16 could mean, "You are asking me to test God by throwing myself down from the Temple. I am not going to do it, because Moses warned Israel not to

test God." But it could also mean, "You are testing God, Satan."

Satan doesn't take the hint. He keeps on testing Jesus. There will be more attempts later, but the last temptation that Satan tries on Jesus in the wilderness is narrated like this:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." -Matthew 4:8-9

Why does Satan take him to a very high mountain? In the Bible, **mountaintop scenes are real estate transactions**. If I sell you this pen, it's simple enough: you put money in my hand, and I put the pen in yours, and you carry it away with you. But houses and land don't fit in your pocket. So we have other procedures. In our day, we get banks and notaries involved and sign a lot of documents. But in the ancient world, you took possession by inspecting the property after the transfer. This is done in the case of Abram in Genesis 13:17: "Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you." The same thing happens when Moses is about to die; in one sense, Moses doesn't get the promised land, because he dies before he can enter into it; but in another sense, God actually gives him the land, because he takes him up on a mountain and shows it to him, and this is the formal transfer of the land: "Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho; view the land of Canaan, which I give to the children of Israel as a possession.." (Deuteronomy 32:49)

Satan is attempting to use the same convention in Matthew 4:8. He is trying to get Jesus to make a deal, offering the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. But **Jesus has no need to make such a bargain**, for God had already promised to *give* the

Messiah everything Satan is offering, and Jesus, whose self-understanding as the Messiah is shaped by Isaiah's description of the suffering servant, knows it very well from Isaiah 49:

The Lord says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

He knows it also from Psalm 2:

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

Ask of God. Not of Satan. The nations belong to the Lord, not to Satan. Jesus has no intention of making a bargain to purchase what Satan wrongly claims to own. In Matthew 12, after the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus replies that,

How can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. (Matthew 12:29)

And he does plunder it. We see the result in Revelation 20:

"And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer..." -Revelation 20:3

And as for the real estate deal Satan was trying to make, well, we see the end of that at the very end of Matthew's gospel. For the Great Commission too takes place on a mountain, and this setting seems significant, especially in light of Jesus'

declaration that “all authority in heaven and earth” has been given to Him. This is a pointed contrast with Satan’s lying statement, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.” (Luke 4:6 NKJV) Quite the contrary, Jesus, having refused Satan’s bargain, and having bound him and plundered his goods, now bestows the kingdom on His disciples and takes possession of the nations by sending his disciples to teach and baptize them.

I want to end by correcting three misapprehensions that some people might have about this story, which may prevent them from grasping what it teaches us about God.

One mistake some have is that Jesus didn’t really suffer in the wilderness; that His divine nature was smirking and unbothered by Satan’s temptations aimed at his human nature; that all these things just rolled off of Jesus like water off a duck’s back. We know this was not the case. Recall Gethsemane again, where Jesus begged the Father to “take this cup from me,” and his sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood — drops of blood, not water off a duck’s back.

A second mistake would be to think that, yes, Jesus suffered, but that’s only because He is human. But that is not what the Bible says. It says that Jesus *revealed* the Father by his sufferings; that if you want to know what the Father is like, you should look at Jesus, for He who has seen Him has seen the Father. Greek philosophers say that God is an unmoved mover, and that God cannot suffer because he is perfect; but the Bible tells us that Jesus was “made perfect *by* sufferings.” (Heb. 5:9) Greek philosophers tell us that God cannot be afflicted; the Bible says that “in all their afflictions, He was afflicted.” (Isaiah 63:9) Greeks and Romans thought that suffering was miserable and degrading, and that if you are suffering, you must not have

any glory or power; the Bible says that Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. *Therefore* — not in spite of his sufferings, but because of them! — God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.” (Philippians 2:8) There is no clearer picture of Israel’s God than the cross of Jesus Christ. That is where we finally see God fully revealed.

Finally, a third mistake would be to think that, yes, Jesus’ sufferings were powerful and important, but ours are not. The truth is exactly the opposite. As George MacDonald put it, “The Son of God suffered, not that we might not suffer, but that our sufferings might be like His.” And they are. “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory...” (2 Corinthians 4:17) We are in the Messiah. His story, Israel’s story, is our story. In Him, we are faithful Israelites, true to Deuteronomy 6. In Him, we are the suffering servant of Isaiah’s prophecies. In Him, the kingdoms of the world belong to us. In Him, we too are victorious over Satan.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, for our sake you fasted forty days and forty nights: give us grace so to discipline ourselves that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may always obey your will in righteousness and true holiness, to the honour and glory of your name; for you live and reign with the Father and Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*