

Seduced by Empire

Luke 4:1-13

First Sunday in Lent/ 6th March 2022

“Full of the Holy Spirit.” Only Luke’s Gospel tells it this way. Luke agrees with Matthew and Mark that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. But only Luke tells us that he went there fortified with the Spirit’s presence and power. Soon after his baptism, full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led into a wild and desolate place to be alone, fast for forty days, and be tested. We often think of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, but the Greek suggests something more like being tested. Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was put to the test, asked to prove his allegiance, forced to examine himself, understand his heart, question his motivations, test his calling. Eastern Christianity calls this *askesis*, meaning “exercise, training, practice,” a time of preparation. Think of it as basic training. Boot camp for the soul. A religious Outward-Bound experience designed to test his mettle. To toughen him up, strengthen his resolve, discipline his heart, and soften his ego, his will to yield to the greater calling and purpose of his life. After forty days, he was famished.

In this famished and weakened state, Jesus was tested three times by the devil. *Diabolos* in Greek, meaning “the divider.” The one who divides. The Divider tests Jesus three times. Each test tries to put a wedge, a division between Jesus and his calling, a wedge between Jesus and his relationship with his Father, with God. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (Lk. 4:3). Jesus doesn’t yield: “One does not live by bread alone” (Lk. 4:4). To each test, Jesus stands his ground by relying upon what he knows to be true, rooted, and grounded in scripture. He responds to each test with verses from Deuteronomy chapters 5-8, which is the account of Moses presenting the divine law to the Israelites on Mount Sinai after having moved through the wilderness. The wilderness wandering was a similar time of testing for the Israelites. Luke wants us to see the parallel here. In the wilderness, they had to learn to rely and trust upon God, to rely upon the manna given daily (Exodus 16), and to know that “one does not live by bread alone, but by everything word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3). They had to discover that God is faithful, and then they had to learn to trust in the faithfulness of God, they had to root their identity, ground their being in God and not in themselves, trusting not in their inner resources or external circumstances or be intimidated or seduced by Pharaoh’s empire and his armies. Jesus had to learn to do the same. He had to cultivate a radical dependence upon God and God alone. And Luke summons us to do the same, for similar tests constantly confront us.

Of the three tests, perhaps it’s the second test that is most relevant in these challenging times. The Divider shows Jesus, “in an instant,” a view of “all the kingdoms of the world” (Lk. 4:5). Or we can say “all the empires of the world” or “all the realms of the world.” Not just the Roman Empire of Jesus’ day, but all the kingdoms, all the empires of the world. Did the Divider give him a glimpse of all the kingdoms and empires across the centuries right down to our present time? “I will give you their glory and all this authority,” meaning their power and strength, “for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. “If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Lk. 4:6-7). *All the empires of the world. You can have all of this, Jesus, all that I have. If you only worship me—the Divider—it will all be yours.*

This is the critical question in this test: will Jesus align his divine mission—that is, his blessing and power, everything associated with this true identity given in his baptism (Lk. 3:21-22)—with the “kingdoms of the world?” This is the question. It’s about power and possessions and possessions giving a sense of power. Will Jesus allow the Divider to split his allegiance to God and his calling? If he gave his allegiance, his worship, to the Divider, Jesus would gain all the kingdoms, but at what cost? He would know full well that the devil was still the one with all the power. To the world, Jesus would appear as emperor, but he would know how he got there.

Theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) knew what it was like to struggle against empire in the 1930s and 1940s in Germany.¹ Jesus “was not asked to renounce God or to go over to atheism. He had only to lift His hat to the usurper. He had only to bow the knee discreetly and privately to the devil. He had only to make the quiet but solid and irreversible acknowledgment that in that world of splendor, the devil should have the first and final word, that at bottom everything should remain as it had been.”²

Jesus knew what he had to do. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (Lk. 4:8).

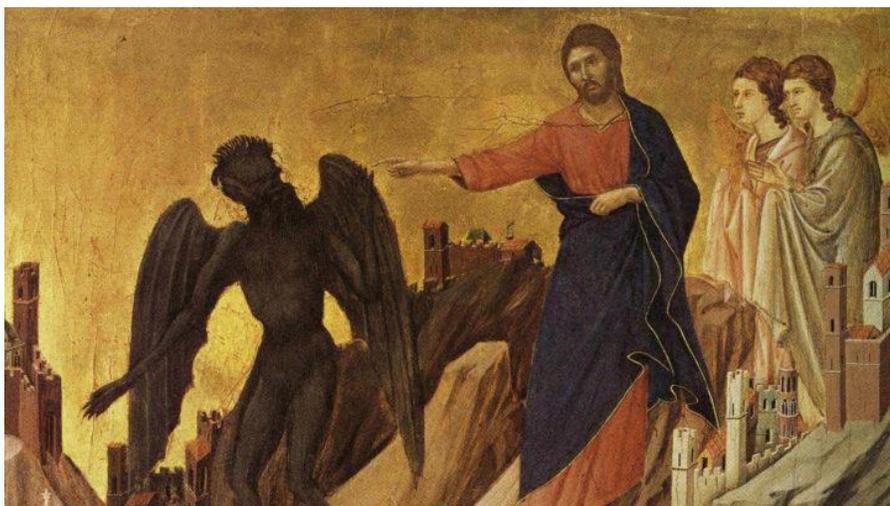
When confronted with this same question, many of Jesus’ followers have been less than sure. For centuries, Christians have tried to have the best of both worlds. The Church has wanted all the glory and authority that empires bring *and*, at the same time, the satisfaction that we are still in God’s good graces. It’s been said that the Christian witness has been in one long, steady decline from the moment Emperor Constantine (c. 272-337) declared Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire in 313 AD. Since then, it’s all been downhill. The English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) long ago derided: “So intimate is the connection between throne and altar, that the banner of the church has very seldom been seen on the side of the people.”³ The commingling of Church and Empire or Church and State has been catastrophic both for the Church—for the witness of God’s gospel of love, justice, and peace—*and* the empires and nations of the world, particularly for so-called “Christian” Europe. Every European knows this tragic story, so we should not be surprised that most Churches are empty on Sunday mornings. While our history in the United States is different, in our day, the rise of Christian nationalism, which was on full display at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, is no less tragic.

Theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1909-1945) knew the dangers of Christian nationalism. Writing from a Nazi prison cell in Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote letters to his good friend and pastor, Eberhard Bethge (1909-2000).⁴ Decades later, Bethge visited the United States. I heard him speak in Princeton when I was in seminary. One Sunday Bethge went to Jerry Falwell’s church, Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA. At the service, he was given two lapel pins. He was first handed a “Jesus First!” lapel and then an American flag lapel. Reflecting on that experience, given what he witnessed in his life, he said, “I couldn’t help but think of myself in Germany in 1933. That was exactly what we believed...on the one hand, our nation’s proud renewal, to which we wanted to devote our energy and time and to make sacrifices if need be; on the other hand, [to devote] to Jesus Christ at the same time. Why not that *relation* and that *equation*? Then I remembered that slow and bitter revelation how in the

interpretation, even in that ‘Jesus First,’ the flag in fact became the guiding force. Of course, Christ, but a *German* Christ; of course, ‘Jesus First,’ but an *American* Jesus! And so to the long history of faith and of its executors another chapter is being added of a *mixed image of Christ...*”⁵

And today, we see a *Russian* Jesus, a Russian Christianity, on full display. It might not be immediately evident, given the evil that the Russian army is unleashing in Ukraine, but it’s there. The religious dimension of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not received the coverage that it deserves. In articles from more than four years ago, Yale historian Timothy Snyder has shown that Putin’s political philosophy is shaped by the thought of the Christian fascist Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), who died in 1954 in exile outside Zurich. Several years ago, Putin had his body disinterred from the cemetery in Zollikon (a village I know well, situated between Zürich and Küsnacht), returned to Russia, and buried in an Orthodox monastery. The presiding monk at the service was likely a former KGB agent. Putin sees himself as leading a spiritual revival of Russia and its people, a return to Czarist Russia, supported by the Russian Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill, supports Putin’s fanciful version of one Russian history and people and has yet to denounce the invasion of Ukraine.⁶ There is a religious war going on between the Russian Patriarch, who refused to recognize the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, who did. And in recent years, some segments of American Christians have been seduced by Putin and eager to support the current Russian Orthodox Church. Snyder says that Putin embodies “a perverted Christianity that denies mercy.”⁷ What Putin is doing now is evil; it is, as the Pope said, “diabolical,” dividing families, communities, peoples, nations, dividing us from God.

“All the kingdoms of the world.” It is so easy to be seduced by empire, by power. Are we guilty of aligning the divine mission given to the Church with the “kingdoms of the world”? Will we? Or do we want to have it both ways? Do we like our “mixed image(s) of Christ”? We can’t escape from these questions because they are directly related to events that led Jesus to be put death by an empire. As we enter the season of Lent and walk again to the cross, we are being put to the test. Where do we place our *ultimate* allegiance? Where do we place our trust? Jesus shows us the way, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God” (Lk. 4:8).



Duccio di Buoninsegna (c.1255-c.1319), *The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain* (1308-11)

¹ See Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: IV.1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), 261-264.

³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1 (1776), cited in John Chryssavgis, "[An Orthodox Christian Standing with Ukraine](#)," *Public Orthodoxy*, February 27, 2022.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

⁵ Eberhard Bethge, "A Visit to Thomas Road Church," *The Wild Goose* (1:2), July 1990, 15-16. Emphasis added.

⁶ After worship, I learned that in his sermon this morning in Moscow, he endorsed Putin's narrative on Ukraine. According to him, "the West essentially organizes genocide campaigns against countries that refuse to stage gay pride parades." Matthew Luxmoor via Twitter @mjluxmorre, Wall Street Reporter in Moscow.

⁷ Timothy Snyder, "God Is a Russian," *The New York Review of Books*, April 5, 2018. See also Snyder's *The Road to Unfreedom: Russian, Europe, America* (2018). Here are other sources to consider: Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, "Putin's Philosopher: Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow's Rule," *Foreign Affairs*, September 20, 2015. Tara Kuzio, "[Russian Nationalism \(Imperialism\) and Ukrainian Nationalism](#)," *E-International Relations*, December 8, 2020. "[A religious politician](#)": [Head of US Ukrainian Orthodox Church slams Moscow Patriarch Kirill, Putin](#)," Religions News Service/ *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 3, 2022. Katherine Kelaidis, "[Make No Mistake, If There's a War Between Russia and Ukraine, It Will Be a Religious War](#)," *Religion Dispatches*, February 21, 2022. Tim Costello, "[Vladimir Putin: A Miracle Defender of Christianity or the Most Evil Man](#)," *The Guardian*, March 5, 2022.