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Luke 4:1-13
3/6/2022

Power-less or Power-with

What kind of Messiah is Jesus going to be?

I have learned a lot these past couple of months teaching from the minor prophets. For instance, you have Amos who sees a messiah in a gardener. Micah sees a great judge who will settle disputes with wisdom instead of warfare. Nahum, Joel, and Obadiah want a great revenger who pays the nations back for what they did to God's people. In this bible study, we have struggled with passages where the prophet calls God to violence and domination of Israel's enemies. We've struggled because many of us do not see Jesus as a conquering warlord, but a nonviolent person more concerned with the marginalized than his own political clout.

Now, I don't want to say that everyone in the Old Testament was wrong about Jesus. Zechariah describes the Messiah as a humble man on a donkey, proclaiming peace. Amos describes the messiah as a gardener, and that is what the risen Christ looks like in the gospel of John. Isaiah sees the Messiah as a suffering servant who will be rejected by the people.

What I'm trying to say is that what kind of Messiah Jesus would be is a controversial issue.

So when Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days to find himself, the biggest question he must ask is whose expectations is he going to disappoint. Enter stage left, the devil.

I've heard of the three temptations so many times. Turning a stone into bread, the glory and authority of the nations, and safely falling 150 feet from the top of the temple. At first, these sounds like three super powers, so why does Jesus need to resist them? The text says that these are temptations from the adversary and Jesus quotes the Bible justifying his refusal. Is this a apple in the garden situation where we know that Jesus should not, but are never clear on the why? Is the point that Jesus remains powerless. I don't think so.

So, let's consider the first temptation, turning stone into bread, to which Jesus responds one does not live by bread alone. This reminds me of mana in the wilderness and Moses striking the stone to get water. So, a good thing right? Well, another interpretation is to think about the second temptation of political power, and how this is usually gained at the point of a sword. So the ability to turn stone into bread, to find food in the wilderness, would be exactly what a revolutionary army would need to fight Rome. What kind of Messiah will Jesus be? Not a violent one.

Okay, so what do we make of the second temptation, the devil giving Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Alright, first of all, very bold of you adversary to say these kingdoms are yours to give... wait. Is this what the text is arguing? That Rome and Parthea are all under the authority of the devil? And to rule these kingdoms is to worship the devil? Wow. What a mind twisting idea! What kind of Messaih will Jesus be? One who sees political power not as salvation, but as corrupting idolitry.

Which brings us to the third and probably easiest of the temptation, the devil suggest that Jesus throw himself off the temple saying that the angels will protect him. However, in this season of Lent, we know all too well that Jesus will not take the path of safety, but will journey to Jerusalem to his death.

So what are these three temptations pointing to? They point to a Jesus who gives up violence, political power, and saftey. So are we to assume that Jesus is becoming a powerless messiah, someone who cannot free God's people from the tyranny of Rome or abuses of the religious leaders? What good is a messaih that does not have the power to save, who does not have good news for the poor?

I don't think so. If we read on a few verses we will transition from this temptation that says who Jesus is not, into Jesus teaching at the synagogue in Nazareth where he opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaims who Jesus is. Someone who is fighting for liberation, good news to the poor, release of captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. Jesus is not powerless, Jesus is power-with. Jesus does not seek power for himself, but seeks to empower others. Why else would Jesus be eating with the outcasts, the prostitutes and tax collectors? Why else would Jesus heal cripples at the gate of the temple so that they could enter? Jesus lived a self-less life, where he was concerned about helping people and not himself. Jesus went to the cross because of his great love for others. Because their liberation was more important than his life.

As we consider this Lentan season, I hope we can consider the example of Jesus as we seek God's way. Let us seek God's way of generosity.