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Worship the Lord Your God, and Serve Only Him

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Luke 4:1-13

[The Temptation of Jesus]

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"*

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

*'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'*

¹¹ and

*'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Growing up in church, I thought this passage was THE proof that memorizing Bible verses was THE key to Christian life. But now I am a grown-up, and a preacher. I believe this story could not be LESS about scripture memory. This story is a deep mystery, with little value for daily discipleship, but immense value nonetheless – Christological value, that is, for considering the question, Who is the Christ we claim as Savior, the Christ we claim to follow?

From this story we perceive that He was and is: cosmic being and power, beyond our comprehension, at work with forces in the universe, that human language cannot

touch. This story is one of language's best efforts at touching it, so that we might chip off a bit of the truth of who Jesus was; see it, feel it, taste it, hear it, smell it – knowing all the while, all we have in our hands is a sliver of something far bigger.

If we understood the whole story, we still understand the lesser part. To that end, friends, it occurs to me that all we read of Jesus in the gospels is surely the lesser part – the time with disciples, teaching, healing, all of it – told in such detail because it was the part for which human storytellers had words. . . . While the greater part more resembled this passage: Jesus, alone in the wilderness, at battle for the salvation of humanity where humanity was of no help and would have, in fact, been more in the way than helpful. Here is the Christ, practicing life inside a human body, seeing precisely how close to death a body can get without dying, what it does to a human mind and spirit.

I believe what we see of Jesus here WAS the larger part of His time on earth: a cosmic battle, constant temptation to do less, to be less, than the Savior of humanity. The constant temptation to see Rome or religion or hunger or hurt as the problem, to let his beloved drive his agenda: “Feed us! Fix us! Keep us safe!”

Aren't our prayers front-loaded with Satan's offers in the wilderness. . . that our loved ones be healthy and well? that justice prevail? that we be kept safe from harm? We don't mean to echo the evil one. We just want what we want. While the Christ came to give what we need, and mostly can't even conceive. How then would we even name it?

The New Testament names it *Salvation*: rescue from our own incapacity NOT to sin or to fall victim to the sins of others. No amount of Bible memory can do it, friends. It IS good for you, for lots of reasons. But it isn't salvific. Only Christ can do that. . . *did* that!

I barely understand it, only in slivers and chips – and even then, only on especially good days. Often, when something really big happens in the Bible, it begins in the wilderness: Moses, Elijah. Israel was born in the wilderness.

It's a literary device for aloneness, for utter dependence on God. Being Christ, he was there with Moses, he was there with Elijah, with Israel at her birth. And now, as Messiah in human form. I wonder if anything to date was wilder than that? Than seeing it all from inside the skin of one of us? With the finitude of such vision and wisdom as ours?

Luckily for our sakes, His compassion for us mostly overrode Jesus' frustration with us. As any well-told story, Luke's gospel begins with a presentation of the central conflict and the introduction of the main characters: the kingdom of heaven, led by Christ, came to defeat death and all of death's minions, however handsome, seductive,

reasonable, helpful and wise they may appear or sound to short-sighted, small-minded creatures like us.

Lent begins with proper understanding; our first task is not deciding to be better people. Yes, eat, drink, smoke, cuss and work less. Sleep, give, exercise and be kind more. But before all of that – and if necessary, INSTEAD of all that – first, know this:

Jesus the Christ came to do for humanity what we cannot do for ourselves: dismantle the power of sin altogether, to render it harmless, impotent, a blank in the arsenal of death.

Mystery that it is, today I cannot explain it better than that. But I trust it; with as much of this heart and shabby life as I can muster, I trust it. And I invite you to do the same.

Would you pray with me?